



NONE BUT THE BRAVE

A Novel by

FRIEDA K. FRANKLIN

Author of ROAD INLAND

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*Author of Road Inland and
The Cleft In The Rock*

This is a story of Kansas in the 1850's—of Phebe Tanner, the pretty young Quaker schoolmistress, and her two suitors, Lieutenant St. Clair and his Indian-fighter sergeant, both of the First Dragoons.

The First Dragoons were stationed at Fort Leavenworth to protect the wagon-trains from the Indians. When trouble erupted between the Abolitionists and the pro-slavery faction, the dragoons, without official authority to interfere, could do little to calm the civil strife. But it was not hard for Phebe, in spite of her peaceable Quaker beliefs, to pick sides in the conflict; she even helped run slaves on the underground railroad. However, when it came to choosing between the sophisticated lieutenant and the stalwart sergeant, her decision was less clear.

Against a background of violence and army post intrigue, the author deft-

(continued on back flap)

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NONE BUT THE BRAVE

ONE

One late September afternoon in 1855, seventy miles west of Fort Leavenworth, a detachment of United States Dragoons, like a column of well-disciplined ants, crept across sunny space—mere thread ends upon a rolling counterpane of green, broken here and there by deep ravines or sharp buttes pushing up from the ocean of grass. The wind sighed dreamily across the prairie; a man coughed, a horse blew, leather creaked, and spurs, bits, stirrups jingled and clanked in an unvarying melody, while dust trailed behind to lose itself in the immensity of blue sky, green grass.

Above the column, a hawk climbed high into the sun, then floated lazily in a great, dipping circle which brought it, without sound, over a feeding rabbit. On a hillcrest to the south, in the shade of a stunted sumac, a tawny coyote watched the slow progress of the horsemen. The day hung hot and hourless, the sun seemed motionless in the sky. A lone cricket chirped forlornly, then let the wind dissipate its song.

The small detachment from Troop B, First Dragoons, continued slowly on its way. Relieved at last from summer duty escorting army supply trains to Fort Kearney and Fort Laramie, the men were on

their way home to take up winter quarters at Leavenworth on the Missouri. Ahead stretched the miles before they would reach their barracks on the bluffs above the river, and the ride home seemed infinitely longer than the ride out had been the preceding spring. The horses were thin and worn from a summer of hard riding and slim foraging, and the men were weary. Sweat beaded their tanned and dusty faces, darkened the sorrel hides of their mounts, stained the leather of their saddles, straps, reins.

Except for a couple of youngsters and the two men riding at the head, the dragoons flaunted heavy mustaches and wore their hair long in a kind of challenge of the scalp to the Indians they fought. Like pirates, many sported thick gold rings in their ears. No collection of weapons was quite the same, although most of the men were equipped with Prussian-type sabers and Hall carbines in saddle scabbards. Nor was there a standard uniform. Some wore breed leggings, others wore boots; some had shirts, and others, uniform jackets; some wore dragoon-blue trousers and the rest, frontier buckskins. In appearance, they resembled more a group of mountain men than a unit of the United States Army.

Here and there in the column, a man hitched himself sideways in the saddle to ease his aching rump, jerked his scarf high around his chin against the constant dust kicked up by the hooves ahead, or pulled at the battered rim of a campaign hat to cut the glare like a knife to the eyes. They were so lulled by the wind and the vast, unbroken land that they could not even look ahead to Leavenworth in expectation of women, whisky, and pay, but sat their horses in lumpish apathy and let them move slowly on.

A man coughed, a horse blew, and Second Lieutenant Lawrence St. Clair turned in his saddle and glanced back along the line, taking care not to look into the jaded faces, not to meet the sullen eyes. At the rear of the column were three led horses, reminder enough of the dragoons who no longer rode with the detachment. Two men lost to cholera near Fort Kearney in July, two men and a horse lost to the Cheyenne beyond the South Platte not a month ago.

My fault? the young officer asked himself, turning back painfully in the saddle. It was a question he had been demanding of his conscience for weeks now without coming any closer to a satisfactory answer.

Two places behind in the column a man hawked loudly and spat.

Color flooded the lieutenant's handsome face and his gray eyes turned cold with anger. He touched his big gelding with his spurs, checking him at the same time with raised rein, making the horse dance sideways in confusion. Damn Miller! he thought. If there is fault to be found in this misfortune it lies as much with his brother as with me! If he'd not disobeyed my orders, he'd not be lying scalpless in the shadow of a Colorado butte, and if these men cannot understand so simple a fact, then I cannot help them! For a moment he allowed himself the luxury of contempt for their bullheadedness. Yet, it was not that simple, and doubt was quick to return. A brother is a brother, he thought uneasily, and a man has to blame someone for his loss.

A senior officer had once advised, "No matter how well you plan and how carefully you execute your plan, you will lose men in battle, and then you cannot carry their ghosts upon your back! This you must accept as an officer. You will lead, they will follow. It's your trade and it's theirs." Yes, St. Clair thought, it's their trade, and mine, but if it were only a matter of blowing "Charge" and galloping full tilt into the melee, there'd be no right or wrong to the matter. Here, though, my decision and mine alone led to the death of two men, and obviously the rest of them think that decision was a mistake. Perhaps it is immaterial that they disobeyed orders. . . .

Once more he found himself reiterating his arguments on his own behalf, a form of mental activity that had plagued him since the incident. The small detachment had been guarding a wagon train traveling the Platte Valley when a Cheyenne war-party had cut their trail, following them for four days with the obvious intent of ambushing them along the way. St. Clair had given orders for every man to stay within sight of the wagon and on no account to cross the Platte. Only the skirmishers were to ride out from the closely-bunched train. However, the command had not eaten fresh meat for a month, and when antelope were sighted across the river, Privates Smith and Miller had thought it worth risking the Cheyenne and his anger to go after them. They had gone out before dawn—and they had not returned.

By evening their comrades had known their fate. Smoke signals, interpreted by the guide, indicated that the two had been captured and were already dying slowly. For two days and nights the

Cheyenne fires mocked the crawling wagon train. To St. Clair this was a simple ruse to split his already small force by luring the dragoons into a rescue attempt; to the men it was a clear challenge to be answered at once and in rage. The First Dragoons were a hardened outfit, with some twenty years of service on the frontier and in both the wars in Florida and Mexico. Beginning as mounted rangers, they were the army's first cavalry unit and their *esprit de corps* was strong. They were unaccustomed to receiving a blow without instant retaliation, not to mention being taunted openly by a bunch of Indians.

On the third day, one of the missing horses came back to the train, bearing the remains. Remembering this—the terrified horse circling just short of the lead wagon, its flanks wet with the sweat of its terror and the blood of mutilation—St. Clair knew that he would never be sure of his judgment again. Reason told him that his decision had been the only one, but his heart doubted, and he thought wearily, would always doubt.

He sighed and wiped the sweat from his face, attracting a side-long glance from the man riding a scarred and jug-headed sorrel at his side. Sergeant Philip Maxwell's cold blue eyes reflected contempt for the officer two years his junior and greener by five in experience. He had no doubts. He would have picked his moment and ordered a charge, relying on surprise and fury to scatter the Cheyenne and to exact a few victims by way of revenge if nothing else. Maxwell made his decisions quickly and, once made, never doubted them. His contempt now was more because he sensed the lieutenant's uneasiness about the whole affair and less that he disagreed with him. The men were dead and that was that. He felt no need to brood. What bothered him most was that the Cheyenne were left with an impression that the dragoons feared them.

On the morning that the smoke signals had first been seen and interpreted he had argued for retaliation. "Give me leave to take six men, Lieutenant," he had urged, "and I'll make a try at it come sundown. Chances are Smith and Miller will still be alive, and I reckon if we gave them braves a little surprise, why, maybe we could pry 'em loose."

"I'm grateful to you, Sergeant, for volunteering in such a business," St. Clair had replied, "but you've seen their scouts on the bluff, you heard Scarsdale say there were at least five hundred

braves in that party. Six men would do you little good, and six men less down here might make all the difference if they attack the wagons. If I were that damned Cheyenne chief I'd be wanting us to do just what you propose, for they have little hope of catching us by surprise between here and the fort. At least, not without giving us a chance to slaughter plenty of them. I'm sure they know this as well as we do."

"We've guarded an outfit with less men than this," Maxwell had retorted. "If we don't make some move to get our men back they're going to figure we're scared of 'em, and then I reckon they'd attack us, surprise or no. Five hundred Cheyenne don't scare me none, Lieutenant. I figure it's better to make a try than let 'em get away with this. Reckon the major would see it that way, too," he added, and got his satisfaction from St. Clair's angry flush.

"You've had your say, Sergeant. Now have the men mount up. We're going on."

In this one respect St. Clair was aware that Maxwell could be correct. Major Henry Arnold might well have pulled some daring stunt to effect a rescue; yet, from what St. Clair had heard of him, he might have been just as likely to shrug his shoulders and move the command along, abandoning the two men without another thought. As a matter of fact, Arnold's judgment had only recently been questioned at the court-martial of one of his subordinates. Actually, St. Clair had thought, it would be kinder to label Arnold's act—a pre-dawn attack on the wrong Indian village in which several hundred braves, squaws and children were slaughtered—an error in judgment rather than a deliberate thing. There *had* been room for doubt on this score after the testimony of a guide, who claimed he had told the major that the tribe was a friendly one and not the one the dragoons were chasing to avenge a wagon-train raid.

To speculate about what course Major Arnold would take was of no help to St. Clair, and so he had had Sergeant Maxwell check each man's ammunition supply, had set out skirmishers, and had warned the supply-train captain to have his men ready for an attack at any time. With the dragoons deployed to make their small numbers as effective as possible, the whole command had moved slowly down river.

But no attack had come. Not that day, nor the next, nor at all. Instead, only the single horse, and it had been plain that death had

not been easy for Smith and Miller. The restlessness among the men, beginning when the guide had first interpreted the Cheyenne signal fires, developed to near mutiny, and openly they showed their contempt for their officer.

It isn't only that I'm new out here and green, St. Clair thought cynically, shifting again in his saddle to ease his soreness. If we'd been attacked they'd have got their anger out of their systems and they might have understood what splitting our forces could have meant, let alone how damned unrealistic Maxwell's talk was. Well, we weren't attacked, and now I've a problem ten times more difficult than any running battle with a war-party would have been! He considered briefly how much simpler life would be if he were one of them. As an officer, he thought wryly, I have no easy answer for anything.

He scratched the dark stubble of beard, and pulling off his dusty, wide-brimmed hat, ran a hand through his black hair. His wide shoulders drooped a little with fatigue, his whole lean length lolled indolently in the saddle. I'll be damned if I don't feel fifty-four rather than twenty-four, he thought, half-closing his eyes, the lids raw from dust and sun.

"Yonder's a wagon train, Lieutenant."

"Where?" St. Clair abandoned his dour musings abruptly, straightened in his saddle, a shiver of apprehension running along his nerves at this new call upon his attention. "Where, Sergeant?"

Maxwell grinned, pleased to have caught the officer napping.

"North of the trace, maybe a mile or two, Lieutenant," he said, "by that stand of trees—to the north of 'em." He did not bother to raise his hand to point out the direction. After watching the officer hurriedly scan the horizon he remarked laconically, "They're corraled . . . sir." The brief hesitation before the "sir" was deliberate, and the smile broadened across his full, hard mouth.

An excellent soldier, he had ridden with Doniphan into Santa Fe, had re-enlisted, and had spent the years since the Expedition as a dragoon, riding the plains, guarding wagon trains and settlers and fighting Indians of a dozen different tribes. He had been on escort and punitive marches to Riado, Santa Fe, Kearney, Laramie, Scott, Union, and all the smaller posts and camps that sprang up wherever Indians, grown desperate and hungry, protested against the influx of trappers, mountain men, traders, gold-seekers and settlers. He

had fought Sioux, Pawnee, Comanche, Apache, Cheyenne, Navajo, Ute, Blackfoot, and experience had made him easy, fortifying his natural strength with the knowledge of his own courage and endurance. He was a born leader of men, never indecisive, never caught between idea and action, and long ago had found his niche in the First Dragoons.

Short, but powerfully built, he had not an ounce of surplus flesh on his broad body. His hair, cut short like St. Clair's, was an exception among the other dragoons. Bright red, deeper than carrot color, it curled closely over his scalp. His eyes were very blue and fierce, and like those of a hawk, caught the slightest distant movement, the smallest of shadows, and the most minute of intentions. Like the hawk, too, his eyes and body acted in concert; he could see and react within the same moment.

Gazing out across the hot prairie, St. Clair marveled at the keenness of the man's vision. Far away, on the swell of land north of the trace, he saw an indistinct chain of shadows which, if Maxwell had not designated it as a wagon train, he would have dismissed as a distant line of bushes or treetops marking the course of a ravine, or, perhaps, a cloud shadow thrown upon the moving grasses. In any case he would have accorded it scant attention, and this knowledge increased his uneasiness.

"I reckon they've got trouble," Maxwell continued after a moment as the lieutenant remained silent. "Too far from sundown to be corralled like that excepting something's holding 'em up."

"Kaws?" asked St. Clair, well aware of the other's derisive grin. "Would they attack this close to Leavenworth? I understand they usually confined themselves to running off horses and stock, and that mostly at night. . . ."

"There's Pawnees," Maxwell interrupted, raising himself a little in the stirrups, "and they ain't whipped down like the Kaws. Don't see no sign of Indians. We ain't cut no war-party trail this side of the river. Likely, this time of year, they're west, getting in meat for the winter. I reckon those people yonder had some sort of breakdown and corralled to keep their stock in so's no meandering Kaws could get to it."

St. Clair nodded. He, too, studied the distant train with care, then turned slowly in his saddle, ignoring the other's widening grin. The hell with you, Sergeant, he thought tranquilly, his poise re-

stored. He wiped his forehead, readjusting his hat to cut the glare of the sun. Better to check on those people up there, he decided. He was about to give the order when, as the column topped a swell, he saw a lone wagon off the trace a mile or two to the south.

"There's a single wagon over there," he said suddenly, and was vaguely pleased to observe the grin leave Maxwell's face. "I don't believe they're moving either," he added, thinking with amusement how so small a triumph could please a man.

Sergeant Maxwell swiveled quickly in his saddle and saw the wagon at once. "No," he agreed shortly, "they ain't moving. They ain't even hitched."

"Trouble of some kind here," said St. Clair. "Take six men, Sergeant, and check into that wagon down there. I'll take the rest of the detachment on by the train and see what's the matter. We'll meet you on the trace a mile beyond them. Wait for us if you get there first. We'll do the same."

"Yes, sir." Maxwell straightened in the saddle, turned his head slightly to the right, and bawled, "First six dragoons follow me. Forward!" He touched his spurs to his horse's flanks, swinging him smartly away from the line of march. Behind him the first six men trotted out of ranks, the detachment closed up and moved on toward the corralled wagon train ahead.

Half an hour later the main detachment arrived, to find cattle grazing quietly outside the ring of wagons, tended by two small boys who hailed them eagerly. A picket line of horses was off to one side, and smoke rose peacefully from a dozen fires within the circle. Emigrants, St. Clair thought, noting the women and children busy among the wagons and stock. He brought the dragoons to a halt near the picketed horses, ordering the men to dismount and stand easy. He handed the reins of his own horse to his orderly and went off to find the wagon boss.

Slapping dust from his hat, he approached a group of men who, forewarned by the boys, had gathered near one of the wagons. They stood silent, watching him come, their stares deliberate—not friendly, not unfriendly. Curious and unconcerned, he thought. Another hundred miles west they'll be damned glad to see the army.

"Where will I find your captain?" he asked one of the group as he came up to them.

The men shifted a little on their feet and looked at each other

in the hesitant way of men waiting for someone else to speak up. Finally, one of them said, "Captain Moore's over to that third wagon yonder. You boys chasin' Indians?"

St. Clair nodded and moved on toward the wagon the man had indicated, leaving a faint buzz behind him. Aha, he thought, grinning, greenhorns! He found three men at work on a cracked wagon-tongue. At his tentative "Captain Moore?" one of them straightened slowly, easing his back with great care from a bent position to an upright one.

"I'm Silman Moore. What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" And at St. Clair's inquiry, "No. No real trouble. Leastwise, no trouble you soldiers can do much about. Ain't much anybody can do, I reckon, but pray a little. Got cholera. Been having it for over a month now. Carried it from Missouri somewhere, been trying to live it down in Kansas."

"Cholera!" St. Clair stared at the man, appalled. Cholera! Only three days ago the detachment had stopped at Fort Riley, and despite the fresh rations and rest their stay there had brought, not a man of the column was sorry to leave that forlorn post, stricken the month before by a cholera epidemic. It had hit construction workers who were building the new fort, and the families of officers and men out on summer maneuvers. When the detachment of dragoons from Troop B had arrived the survivors had still been stunned and listless, moving sadly about the dusty, dreary place. Raw earth covered over a hundred graves so hastily dug that there was little formality of burial. Some lay beside the road, some in the yards of quarters, some in a field, the graves marked by rough wooden crosses, not yet whitewashed.

The dragoons had been chilled by the accounts of the swift spread of the disease; stories of strong men stricken at morning, dead by night; of the sick lying untended when the post surgeon fled with his family, and saved only by two young doctors, one of whom had hurried through the dust and heat all the way from Leavenworth to do what little he could. A major had come home from maneuvers to find his wife lying dead upon her bed, his two children dead in a nearby room. Another officer had returned to a dead wife and sick children being cared for by neighbors. A corporal found his wife pale and thin, scarcely alive. A pretty young girl, not twenty, awoke to knifing cramps and nausea and died before sunset. Men had fled

the bedeviled place, leaving the sick to fend for themselves, only to return shamefacedly to nurse their comrades and bury the dead. There had been no medicine, no known treatment, and the two doctors had made their rounds with a bottle of brandy and rags to clean up the mess. Behind them had stalked the burial detail.

No, cholera was not new to the soldiers stationed in the West. They'd lived with it on the plains for years. It came and went, ravaging a fort, a wagon train, a remote outpost or camp, leaving its victims, often in the very prime of life, in scattered and lonely graves. Strength was not proof against it, nor endurance.

Fort Riley's grief had made a profound impression upon St. Clair and his voice was sober as he asked, "How many cases, Captain Moore?"

"Well, seems like we might be getting the best of it now. Got only four sick. We're waiting here to see how they do." The big man waved vaguely toward the south.

St. Clair's eyes followed the movement of his hand, but it was a moment before he understood what the gesture meant. "That's your sick out there? That single wagon?"

"Uh-huh," Moore replied laconically. Then, noticing the incredulous expression on the young officer's face, his voice sharpened. "Hell, man, we can't keep them in with us no more. Cholera's like a damn brush fire; it catches one place, and you tend it and its crept on around you and before you know it the whole place's on fire. My God, if you knew what we'd been up against!" He mopped at the sweat on his broad face. "If you know what that cholera done to us already you wouldn't be so damn high and mighty here, Lieutenant. We done lost near a round dozen folk since we left St. Joe. Been buryin' them alongside the road wherever they passed on. And it ain't been pleasant for the rest of us. These folks are scared bad and don't aim to take no more chances. We got to get this thing stopped, don't we? Hell, we left 'em plenty of food and water down there and we're a-waitin', ain't we?" He frowned and spat angrily, rubbing his spittle into the dust with the toe of his shabby boot.

"If they've got cholera, they need more than food and water. They need help," St. Clair replied calmly.

"Well, they got it. Miss Phebe Tanner's down there with 'em

and she ain't sick. Leastwise, she wasn't yesterday noon. Her brother was taken real bad, so she stayed with him to care for him and the rest. I tell you, Lieutenant, we done the best we could for 'em and for the rest of us here." The sullen anger slid away from his voice and he began to look thoughtful. "You aim to stop by?" he inquired, again waving his hand toward the south.

"My sergeant is already down there."

"You plannin' on taking 'em back to Leavenworth, by any chance? You are goin' back to the fort now, ain't you?"

St. Clair nodded but said slowly, "It isn't the duty of the army to take care of civilians on the plains, Mr. Moore, only to guard them. However, I'll see what the situation is."

"Well, listen, if you decide to take 'em back with you, why don't you do us a favor and send a man back to let us know right soon? God knows we've wasted enough time already, what with the cold weather coming any damn day." He eyed St. Clair shrewdly.

St. Clair said nothing but started to turn away.

"Aw, hell, you can spare a man to ride back and tell us, can't you, Lieutenant? It ain't but three or four miles," he wheedled.

St. Clair turned to stare at him standing there in the sun, his broad face red and wet with sweat, his heavy lips set in a confident grin. He glanced at the two men who had been helping him repair the wagon-tongue and at the strained faces of others who had drifted closer to hear what was being said. On no face did he see concern, only a raw impatience. They want to be moving again, he thought, nor can I blame them. Winter's coming on, and if winter storms catch them on the plains or in the mountains they might well be doomed. The weak and the ill fall and are left, and I suppose by their code it was enough that they waited here. Aloud he said, "All right, Moore, I'll send a man back by this time tomorrow."

The man nodded, plainly relieved, and as plainly certain that his problem was solved. "Thanks, Lieutenant, we're all beholden to you." He added in a lower, confidential tone as he fell in step beside the officer, as if to escort him beyond the circle of wagons, "If they're dead or 'most dead, ain't no call for us to waste no more time. . . ."

St. Clair quickened his step and walked away from him without another word. All right, he thought, I don't blame you, but men and

nature combine to make harsh law, and if I can I'll refrain from admiring their efforts. He gave the order to remount and, with a sigh, swung himself gingerly into the saddle. Morose and silent, he turned his horse's head back toward the trace, leading off the weary column once more.

TWO

With a caution which was established habit Sergeant Maxwell approached the single wagon slowly. From a distance his farsighted eyes took in the details of the camp: the four cows grazing placidly nearby, two yoke of oxen lying huddled together in the grass, the two unsaddled horses picketed by the wagon—a tranquil enough scene. Smoke rose thinly through the shimmering heat, yet, except for the cattle, there was no movement about the wagon.

Maxwell spurred his horse into a trot and heard the weary jingle behind him quicken, hooves and leather picking up tempo as the six dragoons swept down the gentle curve of a hill at his back. A hundred yards from the wagon he brought his horse down to a walk, holding up his hand for his men to do the same. No need to stampede the cattle, he thought, nor frighten the devil out of anybody . . . if anybody's here.

He brought his horse to a halt twenty feet from the camp and dismounted to stand a moment at the sorrel's head, listening, disturbed a little by the stillness. Nothing moved and there was no sound other than the stir of wind in drying willows marking the course of a narrow stream beyond the wagon. No one appeared. We

could be a bunch of damn Kaws about to run off their stock for all they care, he thought, puzzled. Turning back toward the dragoons, who had dismounted and fanned out and were already digging out tobacco plugs and checking their equipment, he said, "Stand easy, but look sharp. This ain't exactly like I figured."

"There ain't nobody over yonder in that little stream, is there, Sergeant?"

"Whyn't you go on over and see for yourself, Hansen? You think I can see through them willows? Here, Mick, take my horse. You others stay put." He handed his reins to the nearest man and approached the wagon cautiously. You never can tell, he thought. Look twice and take the smell of a place and you'll live longer. He paused at the end of the wagon-tongue lying in the tall grass. No one tended the small fire in its circle of stones, and he walked over to it, seeing the blackened kettle, noting that water, low in it, was steaming faintly. A piece of meat, covered with ants, lay in the grass, and he kicked it away with the toe of his boot. Ain't been long, he thought, and moved over toward the wagon, conscious suddenly of an unpleasant smell. Dead? he wondered.

"What does thee want?"

Maxwell spun around, his right hand flying automatically to the butt of his pistol, but when he saw a young woman by the rear wheel of the wagon, dropping to his side. He fumbled at his belt buckle to cover the motion, hoping she had not noticed. She stood, leaning a little against the wheel, one hand curled about the iron rim. She stared at him fixedly, then raised one hand and rubbed her eyes like a child unable to believe what it has seen. Her face was very pale and sweat beaded her forehead. Her light-brown hair was tumbled, her cheeks streaked with dirt, and her dress, a light-blue gingham, mussed and torn. He could not take his gaze from her face.

"What does thee want?" she repeated in a low, hoarse voice.

Why, she's frightened, he thought. He was aware then of the picture he must make: the dirt, sweat and stubble on his own face, the pistol and knife in his belt, the worn ragtags of uniform and buckskin.

"Why, ma'am," he said quickly, "we're dragoons. We was riding by, that is, the detachment . . ." and he indicated the presence of his comrades beyond the wagon with a wave of his hand. "We saw your

wagon from the trace. Figured we'd best come on down and see if you folks was all right. You got trouble?" He took a step forward, concerned by her pallor and the way her body slumped against the wheel.

"Yes," she whispered, her gaze shifting from his face to take in the indolent dragoons beyond the wagon. Her taut features visibly relaxed and she leaned heavily against the wheel. "Yes, thee is right. We have trouble."

She's done in or sick, he thought, seeing her shoulders sag and her hand rise again to pluck shakily at the bodice of her dress. Why, hell, she's real young, not more'n a girl, and under all that dirt, pretty as paint!

"You sick, ma'am?" he asked, stepping closer, afraid that at any moment she would fall.

She shook her head dizzily. "No, but in there, my brother . . ." She swung a little toward the wagon and he caught her by the arm as her grip on the wheel loosened and she swayed.

"In the wagon? You got sick folks in the wagon? What is it?"

"Cholera," she whispered.

"Cholera!" He stared down into her wan face, aware of the oppressive odor of the wagon, the stillness of the place, and the heat of the afternoon sun. The dismal scene at Fort Riley passed through his mind, but his hard, ruddy face did not change expression, his blue eyes did not waver. "That is trouble, ma'am!" he exclaimed. "But look here, you appear about done in. Best to set yourself, for like as not you've been having a pretty hard time here. You the only one—not sick, I mean?" He felt her weight increasing against his arm and hastened to help her into the shade of the wagon, where he seated her upon the grass. Damn if she wasn't about to faint on him!

"Thee is correct," she murmured lightheadedly. "Four days . . . four nights, I think . . . oh, dear, I don't remember. . . . I'm so tired. . . ." and she began to apologize vaguely, her head resting on her arms folded across her drawn-up knees.

"You just rest easy, ma'am. I'll see to your brother and the rest. . . ."

"Yes, please . . . please . . ." and, exhausted, she slipped sideways in the grass to curl into a small knot, her eyes closing, her cheeks resting upon her clasped hands.

He stared, startled and uneasy. Had she fainted? He bent over her and was relieved to see that her breathing was slow and regular, her body relaxed. Just like that and she's asleep! he thought, bemused, and shook his head in wonder. He could sympathize. Many times he had reached an exhaustion so profound as to find it no trouble to sleep as he stood or rode. Like as not she ain't slept for four days or nights, like she said. He smiled and straightened, turning reluctantly toward the wagon. Seemed like cholera dogged him everywhere he went. Seemed like he'd catch it himself someday, yet even as he walked over and climbed upon the wagon-tongue to peer into the fetid depths, he felt his old sense of immunity return.

The inside of the wagon was dark and close, and with a sigh he climbed off the tongue and circled the wagon, raising the outside canvas and tying it a few inches above the wooden rim. At the rear he pulled the flaps wide and tied them back, then, with a last glance at the sleeping girl, climbed unwillingly over the tail. He shook himself, trying to get rid of the ripple of revulsion like a chill across his skin.

He made out the three people lying lengthwise on buffalo-robe pallets in the narrow wagon bed, like a giant wooden coffin in shape. As he bent over the nearest figure, his eyes growing accustomed to the dimness, he saw a family likeness in a boy's thin, white face, and guessed this to be the girl's brother. Even in the poor light he noticed the dark-blue eyes, here black-circled and sunken. Bad, he thought, as the boy moved weakly and raised a thin arm to pillow his head. Still he seems to have some strength. Could have passed the crisis, or not reached it yet.

"Howdy, son," he said aloud in his nasal drawl. "How you feeling?"

"Where's Pheb?" the boy whispered, trying to look past him. His eyes were suddenly anxious and bewildered. "She's not sick, is she?"

"No. She's fine. She's sleeping. You feel hungry yet?"

"A little," the boy admitted, his eyes still puzzled. "But thee was not with the train. Thee is a soldier?" and there was a flicker of interest in his pale face as he stared at Maxwell's dusty, mismatched uniform, and the big Colt fastened to his belt.

"Right, sonny. I'm a soldier. We saw your train out yonder and

you folks down here, and just stopped by to see if you might be needing the help of the U.S. Dragoons. Seems like we just got here in time. You hungry, huh? That's sure a good sign. Wouldn't wonder if you was on the mend already. I tell you, you just lie here flatter'n a flounder, and soon as I check these other folks I'll rustle you some soup that'll make your tongue stick to the bowl." He placed a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder, smiled at him, and rose to step around him to the two pallets lying side by side at the head of the wagon.

He knelt beside a woman in her middle years, and one glance showed him that she was in the last stages of her illness. Her body was so drained of fluids that the skin of face and neck hung in folds. On her face was the peculiar, anxious expression he had seen so many times on the features of men dying of cholera; he tried to make her as comfortable as he could, convinced she would not live much longer. I reckon an hour or two, he thought. As he knelt on one knee to offer her a little water, enough at least to wet her parched lips, she tried to speak, but was too weak to do more than hiss faintly, her cracked lips moving in a ceaseless pursing and grinning that made him shiver. Uncomfortably, he did his best to reassure her.

"It's all right, ma'am. We'll be taking you on back to the fort with us and they'll take care of you there. Won't be but a little while. You just lie back and rest best you can. Ain't nothing to fret about."

She groaned and stared up at him with frightened eyes, already sheening over, while her lips continued to move desperately. I'm not fooling her, he thought. Death's coming and she knows it, poor soul. Compassionately, he gave her a clumsy pat on the shoulder and what he hoped was an encouraging smile, and rose to turn toward the last pallet. As he knelt, the fingers of his right hand brushed icy flesh and he jumped a little at the contact. He touched the shoulder, shaking it, feeling the unyielding rigidity. Dead. He leaned over to look into the dead man's face. The eyes stared vacantly at the little round of blue sky circled by the front canvas of the wagon. Been taking a good long look, Maxwell thought, as he rose and backed away toward the wagon-tail. Wonder did the woman know he was dead? Have to take him out easy not to scare her more, nor the boy. He glanced again at her face. She was staring

at the canvas arching over its wooden ribs above her head and her mouth still moved, the lips clacking a little, the weakly expelled air hissing past her teeth. Hell, he thought, turning away, what can I do?

Outside again, and with a glance at the sleeping girl, he moved around to the head of the wagon, and as quietly as he could, lifted the dead man over the seat, carrying his burden a hundred feet or so into the prairie, oblivious of the stares of his comrades, some of whom now lay full length in the shade of their browsing horses. Not a man did more than watch, yawn, and spit. If he needed them, they knew he would say so. Otherwise, only a fool would volunteer.

As Maxwell lowered his burden, intending to leave it until the heat of the day was over, he saw something dark lying in the grass, scarcely fifty feet away. Curious, he walked over. A buffalo robe was spread on the ground, but even as he raised a corner he knew suddenly what lay beneath. It was the body of a child, a small girl of six or seven years. He had a swift image of the young woman asleep now in the grass carrying this dead child out here, covering it with the robe, unable to dig a grave in the sun-baked ground. His mouth twitched as he dropped the robe, for his was an inherent belief that women should be sheltered from the grimmer aspects of life, not realizing, manlike, that many were theirs of necessity: childbirth, midwifery, the laying out of the dead. It had never occurred to him that for women traveling West with the wagon trains, and even for the wives of his brothers-in-arms stationed at remote posts, the violent death of animals and men might be almost an everyday occurrence.

As he turned his back upon the dead child, he saw the rest of the detachment come over the long curve of the prairie.

"Cholera, sir," he said as St. Clair halted his horse before him and swung to the ground.

The other nodded, "Yes, I know. They told me about it over at the train."

"This here is one of their wagons?"

"Yes. Seems they left their sick here and went on to what they felt would be a safe distance to wait them out. How are they?"

Maxwell made a brief report.

"Only the boy has a chance of recovery then?"

"Yes, sir. I reckon that's about it. I hope the young lady, his sister, ain't going to be sick. She's pretty well wrung out."

"But surely the boy can't travel yet. Their captain over there wants to leave tomorrow."

"No, sir. That boy ought to lie still at least a couple of days. If he were kin of mine, I'd not like to be taking him further till he got his strength back."

"If we waited here, say, three days, and then took it in easy stages, could we take them on to the fort with us?"

"Yes, sir, I reckon that would be the best." Now, Maxwell thought, I've made all your decisions for you, let's get on with it. Burial party, set up camp, the rest of it.

However, St. Clair was to surprise him. He turned suddenly to the waiting dragoons. "Benson, take the detachment on a good half-mile from here. Travel up that little creek there and set up camp. You're in charge until further notice. Send a man down in . . . an hour for further orders. Better put a detail out to bring in fresh meat if they can. Anything else, Sergeant?"

"Nothing, sir, except bring us some game if they shoot it," Maxwell replied, still surprised.

"All right, hear that, Corporal? Now, then, Sergeant, let's look at the situation here."

"I don't figure it would do you much good to get near these people, Lieutenant. Cholera's a mighty fatal thing."

"I understand that, Sergeant," St. Clair replied dryly. "I saw that at Riley, and one summer in Baltimore."

Benson glanced sideways, meeting Maxwell's hard, blue stare. "Is that all, sir?" he asked, tempering the corner of his grin.

"Yes. You men go on ahead." St. Clair returned his salute and moved after Maxwell, who had stamped off toward the wagon. "You know very much about cholera, Sergeant?" he asked, catching up.

"Some. Seen a lot of it since I came to the border."

St. Clair stopped suddenly. "That the young lady?" he asked in some astonishment, indicating the girl who lay where she had fallen, curled in the grass, one hand pillowing her cheek, her face half hidden by a tangle of light-brown hair. Looking down at her, Maxwell could have sworn she hadn't moved an inch.

"She just keeled over in a heap like that," he said.

St. Clair smiled at this description. "Well, we'll let her sleep. Time enough to talk to her later."

They went on to the wagon and climbed in over the tail. When they emerged again, St. Clair's face was pale and he wrinkled his nose, trying to rid himself of the smell. Of all the sad, undignified ways to die, he thought, cholera must surely be the worst!

"I'll bury 'em, sir," Maxwell announced flatly. "I didn't hardly expect her to die so quick, though I knew she wasn't about to last long." He looked at the other, his face expressionless, but he was thinking slowly . . . whatever else he is, I reckon the lieutenant's a gentleman. He was startled to find himself trying to weigh this man; except for that morning on the Platte, he had been nothing if not indifferent to Troop B's brand-new officer.

"No," he heard St. Clair say curtly, "you know what you're doing with this cholera business. You take care of the boy. I, at least, know how to dig a grave."

Surprised, he protested, "Well, sir, we could get a couple of men back. Or, I could do it later." He moved for the shovel fastened to the wagon side, but the other forestalled him.

"When I was a corporal at the cavalry school at Carlisle I cleaned many a stall, Sergeant. I think I'm equipped to dig graves. You go on and take care of the boy. With any luck he may be saved. I'll call you if I need help." And with a curt nod he set the shovel to his shoulder and moved around the corner of the wagon, leaving Maxwell staring after him. He was startled but not particularly impressed. He just hadn't expected this much from this green dandy of an officer. The summer campaign under his command had been anything but auspicious. He had started by pouring out the whisky the men had hoarded and hidden for the trip out from Leavenworth, and he'd finished with the inglorious loss of two dragoons without a shot being fired on their behalf. And in between, he had not endeared himself to his men. There were rumors that his father was a bigwig in the War Department, and a rumor of this sort was enough to make a dragoon's lip curl. That he had been in the ranks once, and made no secret of it, did not help him with the men. In a way, this was a distinct drawback, for here again, they found no reason for respect.

Yet there he goes, thought Maxwell, pride and manner with a shovel on his shoulder like any laboring man. Does that make him

a gentleman then? One damn thing for sure: it makes him like no officer I ever served under! He shrugged and moved toward the wagon. Live and learn, he told himself, yet was disconcerted enough to hurry about his own tasks with the vague idea of relieving the lieutenant.

THREE

Phebe Tanner woke so slowly, that she was not even aware of passing from sleep to consciousness, and so felt caught still in the suffocating web of a nightmare, even as a faint chinking sound penetrated the curtain. She was certain that she had fainted in the dark wagon, that lying next to her was the cold body of Mr. Atchinson, whom she could not move; hard as she tried she could not lift him from the wagon. Irrationally, she was afraid that he would take Jen . . . Jen, she thought weakly. I must get up and see to Jen. . . . She moaned aloud and stirred, opening her eyes. It was night, there were stars and firelight, and she was in the open, not the black, airless wagon with its smell.

"Jen!" she cried, sitting bolt upright to stare with unfocused eyes into the night.

Across the fire, St. Clair almost dropped a tin mug of coffee, and the hand moving a spoon around the steaming cup was arrested by that wild cry.

"Jen!" She turned her head, pushing frantically at the heavy buffalo robe they had covered her with at sundown, and stared at him with wide, frightened eyes. Gradually, her gaze began to focus,

and bewilderment and anxiety replaced the rigid tension in her face.

He rose quickly and came around the fire, stooping to set the cup on a flat rock beside the coals. "Jen?" he said soothingly. "Is that your brother? The boy?"

She nodded, glancing beyond him, confused. This was not the man she had seen, the one with the red hair. Or had she seen him? Was it all part of a nightmare? Where had he come from, this one? And what was she doing here on the grass?

He smiled. "He's a very lucky boy, then, for he's passed the crisis."

"He's all right?" she whispered. "Oh, does thee say he is all right?"

"Yes, he is all right. He will live," he replied simply.

"Ah, thank God! Thank God!" And she put her face in her hands and began to cry, at first quietly, and then with increasing abandon as racking sobs shook her body.

"Please . . ." St. Clair began awkwardly, feeling wholly inadequate, unable to do more than bend helplessly above her, one hand stretched tentatively to touch her shoulder. He was not used to dealing with the bared emotions of women. He had never had a sister, and his mother was a Southern gentlewoman who masked her feelings behind her bedroom walls; the women he had admired he had known in a more or less formal pattern—discreet flirtations, which had only twice blossomed into more passionate affairs. No woman had ever wept before him except in anger and, for once, he found himself completely at a loss.

At that moment, Sergeant Maxwell stepped into the firelight and St. Clair turned to him in relief. "I don't know . . . the poor girl woke up quite frightened and . . ." He was suddenly aware that the sergeant was staring at him accusingly, his face gone brick-red and his mouth set in an angry line, Good God, he thought, he thinks I've said something to make her cry so! He forgot his helplessness in amusement, and was wondering wryly how he could possibly explain, when the girl's sobbing subsided. She sighed audibly and began to scrub fiercely at the tears on her cheeks, blissfully unaware that she was streaking dust in swaths, like Indian war paint, across her face.

Maxwell's face cleared at once and without a word he turned

to the fire, found a clean tin cup, filled it with coffee from the blackened pot, ladled a generous spoonful of sugar from a leather bag, and stirring it quickly, went over to her to proffer it gravely, holding the hot metal against his hand that she might have the cooler handle.

"I am sorry," she murmured, looking up and away, not meeting his eyes as she drank.

Maxwell cleared his throat, waited a moment, then said slowly, "Why, no need for you to be sorry, ma'am. Your brother, now, he took some soup just a bit ago and he kept it down. That's a good sign in cholera. I reckon all he needs is a little time to get some flesh on his bones. Don't figure you need fret about him none."

She nodded like a child and sipped the steaming coffee. St. Clair stood to one side, marveling at his hard-bitten sergeant's gentleness, while Maxwell sat on his heels, steadying the hot cup as she drank, his gaze wandering to the night, the stars, the edge of the moving firelight, and returning in quick, stolen glances to her face. When she had finished, he rose reluctantly, looking at the empty cup in his hand with a vague, startled expression. "I thank thee. That was very good," he heard her say, and saw her smile as she pulled the buffalo robe around her shoulders. Color was returning to her cheeks and her eyes were brighter. With a wholly feminine gesture she pushed her hair back from her face, smoothing it, tidying it as best she could. Maxwell nodded. "I'll brew more," he said and turned away.

"I must . . . I must see to Jen," she said, addressing his broad back, then looking toward St. Clair.

"He's sleeping, ma'am. Nothing would be gained," Maxwell replied, pausing by the fire. "If I was you I'd let be for now. He needs the sleep."

"Sergeant Maxwell's right," St. Clair put in, taking a seat near her on the ground, crossing his long legs, and prodding the edges of the fire with a stick. "I believe you might keel over if you were to try to get up right now, and we'd have all this reviving to do over again," and he smiled at her.

Her anxiety vanished and she smiled in return. "That would be a trial for thee, wouldn't it?" she murmured.

He laughed. "Well, perhaps fainting would be difficult after a

cup of the sergeant's coffee," he conceded. "By the way, I'm Lawrence St. Clair and this is Sergeant Philip Maxwell. We're dragoons on our way to Fort Leavenworth for the winter. And you are Miss . . .?"

"Tanner . . . Phebe Tanner," she supplied dreamily, hardly hearing him, feeling a contented lethargy in relief and warmth and rest. Now that her concern for Jen was eased, her exhausted body sank into a pleasant immobility.

"I think it improbable that you and your brother will be able to continue on west with the train. They want to be moving on as soon as they can." He went on, "We thought, if you concur, that the best thing for you to do is to let us take you to Leavenworth with us. There's a good hospital there and I'm sure they'll be glad to take care of your brother. We thought it might be wise to remain here a few days until he has gained sufficient strength for the trip. Have you relatives with the train? Is there someone we should consult?"

With an effort she brought her wandering attention back to what he was saying. "Relatives?" She looked about her, the firelight advancing and retreating around its circle of stones, the early stars lying low against the deep-purple horizon, the dark mound of the prairie rising to a low hill beyond the wagon. "No. No relatives. Jen and I are alone . . ."

"No one over there we should consult?"

"No. No one. My father and mother died when we were young. My aunt and uncle were our guardians. They died of cholera just after we left St. Joseph. I was . . . I was so afraid for Jen."

"Yes. I can understand that . . . but about the . . ."

"Thee has not said," she interrupted suddenly, "thee has not said. . . . Mrs. Atchinson?"

"Mrs. Atchinson," he said soberly, "died a few hours ago. There was nothing we could do. . . . It happened very quickly, not long after we arrived here."

"Oh," she said forlornly. She hadn't really known the Atchinsons before they were placed in her uncle's wagon and left to her care, but in the four days she had tended them they had been brought very close. Ill as they were, they had never complained, had thanked her humbly and gratefully for whatever she could do for them.

"They're all dead," she whispered, "all dead, though I thought there might be a chance. I prayed for her . . . oh, I prayed for her. When the child died, she wanted her and I could say nothing to ease her. I had to leave the child on the grass. Poor thing; I could not even bury her. And then he died and I tried to move him. . . ." She looked up, suddenly distraught, the whole nightmare vivid again. "I tried to move him, but he was so heavy, I could not budge him. I tried to keep her from knowing, but she kept whispering, asking . . . and then she felt his hand. She knew . . . of course, she knew. I tried again while she slept . . . but I couldn't . . . he was too heavy. . . ." She paused, staring into the heart of the fire, overcome by her failure.

There was a long silence. The two men averted their eyes from the grief in her face and listened to the hiss and pop of the fire, the night wind in the grass, and, far away, a coyote. And then the girl's anguish spent itself and she slipped back into a dreamy lethargy, wishing, even, that they would go away and let her curl up once more in the grass. I'm so tired, she thought defensively, yearning for sleep again.

After a while, St. Clair broke the silence, remarking, "It's lucky for your brother, Miss Tanner, that it happened to be Sergeant Maxwell who did come along. I believe it has made the difference."

Maxwell flushed and gave him a sour look.

"Oh, and I have not thanked thee!" she cried, ashamed. "I have not even thanked thee for saving Jen's life!"

"I doubt I did that, ma'am. I reckon somebody would've come along," Maxwell muttered, retreating a little toward the edge of the fire, where he squatted again on his heels and busied himself with tobacco pouch and clay pipe.

For the first time she looked fully at the two dusty, bearded soldiers with pistols and Bowie knives at their belts. They were a fierce and unkempt-looking pair, and Maxwell, with his bright hair and skin burnt a deep red-brown by the sun, was by far the fiercer of the two. Now, embarrassed, his clear blue eyes hooded as he stared down at the dark tobacco shreds he tamped into the pipe-bowl; his face seemed sullen and unhappy.

"But I do thank thee with all my heart," she said, "and I cannot possibly say how grateful I am to thee both. But if it is ready, might

I have more coffee? And then I *must* look in on Jen, if for no other reason than to set myself at ease."

Both men moved for her cup, but Maxwell's violent spring forward from his haunches brought him out in front. He snatched it up, whirled and reached for the pot in one motion. St. Clair grinned, amused by his determined face, and watched as he returned to bend stiffly over the girl. Lord, he thought, glancing at her as she accepted the steaming cup with murmured thanks, I'd no idea the sergeant was such a ladies' man. Undoubtedly, under all that dust and dirt she's a pretty girl. Certainly she is young and a Quaker, for the "thee's" and "thou's" could mean nothing else. On impulse, he rose and walked over to his saddlebags, and rummaging through them, came up with a reasonably clean piece of cloth, which he dampened with water from his canteen. Returning to the fire, he offered it to the girl with a slight bow. "If you'd care to wash up a bit, Miss Tanner . . .?"

"Am I so dirty?" Startled, she set her cup upon a rock, and raising a hand to her face, drew her fingertips along her cheek to stare in dismay at the dirt they collected. "Oh, heavens!" she exclaimed, grabbing at the cloth he offered, to scrub frantically at her cheeks. "How filthy I am!" She held out the cloth, her expression registering mingled horror and amusement. "I'm surprised that thee did not laugh. . . ."

St. Clair smiled. "How could we? I'm afraid we're no cleaner. We're all fit company, I guess, but never mind; when we get to the fort we can enjoy the luxury of a bath."

She blushed and returned his cloth without another word.

Across the fire, Maxwell's mouth tightened. He resented the officer's facile manner and joking tone, and above all, the way he assumed the initiative just as though he'd been the one to find her half-fainting against the wheel. Like I hadn't set things to rights here, and seen to her brother, and brought out the buffalo robe so's she wouldn't catch her death! he thought bitterly. The recognition of the other's easy familiarity with women enraged him the more because he knew himself a hopeless dunce before a girl like this; he knew himself incapable of light conversation and completely ignorant of the social amenities. Never before had he felt so inadequate.

By God, he thought angrily, if I'd gone to school like him maybe I'd know what to say to her! I reckon if I'd pips on my shoulders, or a father to get me a pair and put cash in my pockets, I could speak up proper to a lady! If I'd gone to dances and fancy balls and the like . . . and there he ground to a halt. He'd never danced in his life, he'd never held a woman in his arms—except to make love to her when his body demanded it and he'd paid down his dollar. And the women? Hell! What could you say of a whore? With restless fingers he picked up a stick and broke it, tossing the pieces into the flames. This here is the first one wasn't a tart I been this close to in years, he thought, and he . . . he . . . ah, my God, the hell with him!

"I hoped to teach in Oregon," he heard her say. "I thought it was time I was no longer a burden for my uncle. I don't know now what we shall do, Jen and I. Everything has happened so quickly and I haven't felt like planning . . . not knowing."

"This is a harsh country. There are often times when no planning will help," St. Clair replied simply. He took a clay pipe from his jacket pocket and carefully tamped the bowl full of tobacco. With compassion he thought of all the men and women and children he and his dragoons had passed that summer, as they rode briskly through the dust of the crawling wagons, passing the sweat-drenched, dusty people plodding beside their oxen, heads bent like the dumb beasts they guided. Sometimes the women and children rode, jolting about in the springless wagons; sometimes they walked with the men, all going God knew where. All searching for their personal El Dorados, he mused, with many a poor devil ending in a shallow grave beside the trace. Thoughtfully, he reached for a burning stick and lit his pipe.

"I suppose," the girl murmured, "we are lucky to be alive, Jen and I. I ought never to complain about anything again if Jen is truly spared."

"Pheb . . . Pheb . . ."

At the weak call her head came up; she scrambled to her feet to stand, swaying slightly, trying to get her balance. "Jen!" she cried.

Before Maxwell could move, St. Clair was at her side, supporting her as she started weakly forward. He had to stand and watch the officer help her to the wagon, watch as they both entered, and listen to the murmur of their voices beyond the canvas. Again he

was assailed by loneliness and regret. If I'd ever had a chance, he thought. How's a man to make up for twenty-some years of missing out? But damned if I don't make a try at it! Damned if I don't! His jaw hardened. After all, he'd had little occasion in the past to doubt himself.

FOUR

For seven days the small column crawled steadily eastward, the pace of the dragons' horses considerably slowed by the oxen and wagon, and the dust considerably increased by the clumsy wheels. The days were hot and sun-drenched, the nights were chill, and each dawn found the mark of autumn plainly cast upon the whitened grass.

For Phebe Tanner the slow, sleepy jolting through sun and wind and dust was a gradual return to reality, a journey away from the nightmare of cholera, abandonment, and death. Youth gave her elasticity, and eighteen years of a calm and sheltered existence were not easily toppled. Although her body and her mind had been severely tried, her experience sobered but did not warp. She felt that she had matured, and was half proud, half regretful of the change. Above all else, she was thankful to watch her brother's return to health.

For Philip Maxwell, these seven days were a self-revelation, days of alternating joy and bitterness, for never in his life had he been so self-conscious, so weighed and found wanting, nor could anyone have told him that this was a quirk of the mind and imagination

alone. Sometimes he saw himself as magnificent, but more often as merely ridiculous, and he was in the first state entirely smug, in the second reduced to despair. Hopefully, he would balance his deficiencies against his good points, hopefully attribute either blindness or rare insight to the girl, and during it all he was at once miserable and in ecstasy. He had never known this state. He did not think of himself as being in love. He could not begin to imagine what suddenly ailed him.

While Jen was still unable to do more than lie on his bed of buffalo hides in the wagon, Maxwell had assigned a dragoon to ride beside the oxen to keep them moving. As often as he could manage, he took this chore upon himself, letting his horse drift back until he paced beside the wagon. Phebe always greeted him warmly, seeming to welcome an opportunity to talk to him. At first, she carried the burden of conversation, telling him about her home in Pennsylvania, describing their trip west, discussing the plans she and Jen were trying to make for the future. After a few days, thanks to her friendliness, he began to be more at ease, and soon he was telling her incidents of his life on the border, well-expurgated versions which his comrades would never have recognized as being from the life they, too, shared.

He had no manners; he was rough and curt, but Phebe enjoyed his company and his tales, for they shed a light on the West she had so barely glimpsed.

"It ain't civilized," he said one day, shortly after his shyness had thawed and he had progressed to a state, for him, of loquacity. "Even Leavenworth ain't civilized. I found that out the first day I reported into the First Dragoons. I'd been to Mexico with Doniphan, so nothing much could shake me, I reckon. But I figured when I got as far east as the Missouri and to a big post like Leavenworth, things would be tidy. Civilized. But it wasn't that way hardly. I turned into Troop B, like my orders read, and was reporting to Lieutenant Snell—he's gone now, been gone about two years, got an arrow through his lung and I ain't sure whether they cured him or not, never did hear—anyway, that day he was acting captain and I reported to him, and we was talking when he heard a couple of shots. He said . . . 'Oh, damn . . . ah, the devil' and rushes out of the barracks, and I went after, feeling curious . . . a little. Out on the Main Parade there's a civilian lying dead by the

magazine and another civilian walking away, blowing down his Colt barrel. He comes up to the lieutenant and says, 'Well, I done it, told you I would and I did.' And the lieutenant says he's a damn . . . ah, a fool, but since he did he can just remove the body. But this fellow just grins and walks off. Well, ma'am, right then and there I found out how civilized the fort was! The general, he got mad and sent a dragoon down to Leavenworth—the town, you know—to tell them authorities there to come and get the body since it was a civilian. They didn't bother about it none and the general was fit to be tied and told the lieutenant to leave it where it lay and let it rot for all he cared. It was a civilian problem, not the army's. After three days I couldn't stand it no longer so I snuck out and spread a little dirt on him. It was more than I could stomach even though I'd seen . . ." He paused, struck by the thought that this might be no story for a young lady's ears. He glanced at her anxiously, cursing himself for all kinds of a fool.

"I've always heard," she said, laughing, "that the army and the civilians don't get along, but I never thought they'd carry it that far!"

Relieved, he grinned and nodded and continued eagerly, "Oh, yes, ma'am, they will and they did! The general kept saying it was up to the civilians in town, and they kept sending back that it was the business of the fort since it had happened there, and the poor fellow got caught between them and just lay where he fell. Somebody finally picked him up; some friend of his, I reckon, couldn't stomach him being there no longer. It do go to show that a place ain't as civilized as it looks."

"Tell me about the Indians," she asked one day. "What are they really like? Are they as cruel and savage as people say? Or does thee not think it is because we have mistreated them so?"

"Well, ma'am, I reckon it's some of both," he replied, making a cautious approach, for he felt her sympathy for the Indian and would rather have stepped into a nest of hornets than run head-on into it. He knew that if he told her exactly what he thought she might never speak to him again, so he tempered his ancient hatred to answer soothingly. "They're cruel and they're savage, there's no denying, and I can't figure out how it would be due just to them being pushed back from their hunting grounds, though that might be some of the cause. Well, look how they'll shoot an ox or a

cow full of arrows and leave the poor brutes still alive. There's no accounting for that, to my way of thinking, and I reckon it's just because they're naturally cruel. Many a time we've come upon some settler's stock wandering around with arrows in their bellies, trying to eat. I've seen 'em feather-deep and the beast still living. In fact, I've seen one old man's cow with three arrows in her, one feather-deep in the belly, and she was thriving for him and he wouldn't kill her at all, said she'd do all right even if the grass she chewed fell out of her. She was, too," he hastened to add, as her face changed color. "But take them Indians in their lodges, and lots of mountain men I've met say they're as peaceable and quiet as ordinary folk, and that they're real loving with their women and kids. I don't know about that. When I've been to their lodges I've been as a soldier doing a soldier's duty, and I reckon I never got to see 'em peaceable."

"It made my uncle very angry," she murmured, "when he saw the stacks and stacks of buffalo hides on the steamboat landing at St. Joe. He said it was no wonder the Indians were attacking everybody if that was what we are doing to their natural game. He couldn't believe there could be any buffalo left!"

"There's plenty, though I ain't seen 'em in the big herds like we used to find during the Expedition. Still, there's so many of 'em and they eat the grass down so close along the trails that we've many a time dropped howitzer shells in on a herd to thin 'em out, so there'd be grazing left for our horses and mules making the trip on to Santa Fe and the forts. Major Arnold once took a detachment of light artillery out along the Santa Fe Trace and shelled a thousand buffalo to keep 'em from eating out the grass."

To his surprise, her expression was shocked and she voiced dismay. "But that's . . . that's slaughter!"

"Well, yes, I reckon it might be, ma'am. We didn't take no hides and only the meat the command needed right then, but when you figure we was protecting the grazing. . ."

"But what a waste of life!" she protested. "And if I were an Indian and knew that the buffalo that had fed me and clothed me for centuries were being slaughtered and left to rot, and if I saw soldiers shelling them, I . . . I think I might go on the warpath, too!"

"The grazing . . ." he'd replied stubbornly, having no real answer,

although, later, he'd argued it back and forth in his mind, his sleep that night even suffering because he couldn't find a proper rejoinder, one, that is, which would not dismay her further.

It was about this time that he noticed the marked difference between her relationship with him and with the officer. With him she was usually serious and reserved, although always friendly, but with the lieutenant she laughed a great deal and her voice became light and quick. St. Clair, on his side, would speak animatedly, in marked contrast to his own sober, rather labored attempts at conversation. And when he had noticed this, and had watched and been wholly aware, the hurt was like fire in his flesh. He began to vacillate between sullenness and a desperate eagerness, and was the more miserable or the more elated, depending on how he interpreted his reception at any given time. More and more he looked upon the officer as his rival.

St. Clair obviously enjoyed the girl's company; to flirt mildly with her was pleasant, but he did so in a detached fashion, being wholly involved with himself and his problems. If Maxwell had been better versed in the manners of St. Clair's social world, he might have recognized this mild flirtation as mere form. Even the unworldly Phebe knew his lighthearted manner meant nothing. For his part, St. Clair was too worried about the eventual outcome of the affair of the South Platte to think very much about anything else.

Considered in the light of his heredity, this uncertainty of the rightness or wrongness of his actions was a freak of nature. The St. Clairs were wealthy Eastern Shore; the men were always successful and always begot sons; the women were eminently lovely, talented, and the social leaders of their communities. From such as these had evolved this thin-faced young man with intense gray eyes and a wide forehead, and from such as these he had fled. The oppressive influence of a famous father and two highly successful older brothers had been too much for him. Educated at Harvard, and destined by family fortune and precedent for the law—which he hated—he had secretly enlisted in the army at a Boston recruiting station.

His escape had been foredoomed, as his father could have told him it would be. It was not difficult, once the elder St. Clair discovered that his son had enlisted, to see that he was tracked

down by the Secretary of War's office. Yet, while his freedom had lasted, St. Clair had been happy. He had been happy in spite of the fact that never before had his life been so Spartan, his companions so lacking in rudimentary manners and education, his dignity so unspared. In the hard ranks of the soldier he had risen to corporal at the cavalry training school at Carlisle Barracks. And, although he had often to admit to himself that there was much in a soldier's life which did not please him, he had also found a compensating pride and pleasure in advancing on his own merits. In this respect he was very much aware of his good fortune, knowing that many of his Harvard comrades, also sons of the rich, had already hooked one foot to the bar of life to drink down their precious hours in one long, sustained draught. No real sense of accomplishment, however small, would be theirs; their way well-cushioned, the pick of careers laid out for them, they could only stand numbly in place, chained by social standing and mores, and fritter time into oblivion.

Ever since the War Department had tendered him a commission his own self-respect had suffered, and his sense of accomplishment had been swiftly overwhelmed. Why, he had asked himself a hundred times since, did I accept it, knowing that it had been procured by my father? Why did I delude myself so as to exchange freedom for a set of tarnished gold straps at the shoulder?

However, he knew only too well why. First, because he had allowed himself to surrender to the notion of his father's omnipotence. Second, he had actually liked the idea of being an officer, of wearing gold pips and of enjoying the prerogatives and authority they brought. He had liked the image of himself riding at the head of other men, he had even taken boyish pleasure in picturing himself in dress uniform, complete with saber and epaulets, holding court at military balls. And, finally, he had wanted the softer life of orderlies, higher pay, the privacy of officers' quarters.

He had had his dress uniform and gold straps, and now he rode at the head of his men, but thrown into the bargain was an unlooked-for sour apple. His commission, in a way, made him neither fish nor fowl; as a non-West Pointer he hardly qualified as an officer in the eyes of his peers or his subordinates. As a non-West Pointer he had to prove himself, for nothing about him would be taken for granted, not his merit, nor his position, nor his courage. Thus, he hung in the neverland of false identity or nonentity, he couldn't

be sure which. It was an uncomfortable status, and would have been an even more difficult one had it not been for his name, his father, and his money. He had come full-circle and was once again back where he had started; freedom was a lost illusion, self-respect a punctured dream.

Thus, caught up in his personal anxieties, his concern over the loss of two men to the Cheyenne, and his uneasiness about the reception he would receive from his superiors upon his arrival at the fort, he was not even aware of his sergeant's strengthened antipathy. The fact that he was to come late into this situation, born of the long seven days, was to have meaning for him the rest of his life.

FIVE

Late on the afternoon of the seventh day, Sergeant Maxwell identified Pilot Knob in the distance and, after informing St. Clair that they would be in the Salt Creek Valley within another two hours, rode back to tell Phebe Tanner the news. He pointed out the big ridge rising over the lesser hills, explaining, "There used to be a big pile of stones on top of the Knob, but they're mostly gone now, though I never did hear who took 'em or why. Squatters, I reckon, to build their chimneys and such. Pilot Knob's the highest point in the region. You can see it quite a piece down the Missouri."

"Does thee know who put the rocks up there?" she asked, intrigued.

He shrugged. "Indians, maybe. They're great ones for burying their chiefs, ponies and all, high on a hill. Makes the chief still king after he's dead, or maybe they think his ghost'll take to the view."

She smiled. "Thee is a philosopher, Sergeant. Will thee be glad to get back to the fort?"

Again, he shrugged. "Yes . . . and no. By the time the winter ends I'm fit to be tied! A man has only the barracks, drill, and the saloons, till it's time to go on campaign again."

"That does not sound very enticing, but if thee does not marry and raise children what else is there for thee to do?"

"Eh?" He glanced at her, startled, thinking that she might be making fun of him, but her face was grave, her tone thoughtful. "Why, I reckon I hadn't given it much thought," he muttered and spent the next hour thinking of nothing else. By the time they had reached the bridge spanning Salt Creek he had reached the conclusion that she was absolutely correct, that a man without a family found garrison life intolerable, whereas the married men could hardly bear to take themselves away in the spring.

Meanwhile, Phebe, in all innocence of the stir she had created, sat on the high seat of the wagon with Jen beside her, watching as St. Clair halted the dragoons at the bridge to hold an animated conversation with Sergeant Maxwell and Corporal Benson. After a few minutes he nodded and, turning his horse, rode back to the wagon, where he dismounted and came to stand beside the wheel.

"It seems there's a little ceremony the dragoons go through at this particular spot," he explained, "and since this summer was my first campaign and I know nothing about it, I'll join the ranks of the spectators—at least until the sergeant recalls me to duty." He let his horse out full length on the rein, allowing him to crop at the thick grass growing along the roadside, while he leaned comfortably against the wheel.

"But where is the fort? Aren't we very close?" she asked, puzzled and eager, visions of the bath he had once promised seeming very cool and delicious at that moment, and so near!

"The fort? Just around that hill. That's Sentinel Hill, and Government Hill is just beyond it. The road leads around the shoulder there ahead and over the ridge, and there is Fort Leavenworth. The town is off to the right in the valley. As soon as the men get cleaned up here, we'll be on our way again."

"Cleaned up? Out here? But whatever for? Was thee not speaking of very good barracks at the fort?"

He grinned. "It does seem odd, doesn't it? I suppose you could say it's a tradition. They stop here on their return from a summer campaign to make themselves presentable; then they march onto the post to be inspected at once by the commanding officer. It's a military way of doing things."

Maxwell meanwhile had led the dragoons into the field bordering

the creek and had given the order to dismount. The men set to at once, first cleaning the jaded horses, brushing out manes and tails, trimming fetlocks with their knives, and washing mud and sand from worn hooves. Then they turned to their equipment, cleaning carbines and pistols, polishing bits, spurs and sabers. At the last, they pulled off their shirts and beat the dust from the frayed cloth against their thighs before putting them on again. Hats, too, were dusted and reshaped, uniform jackets pulled out of saddle rolls and the wrinkles smoothed away, beards trimmed as well as possible with razor-sharp knives and no mirrors, and faces were washed. In all, a little more than an hour was spent in the general shakedown. By the time all was in readiness, the sun was low on the horizon and the coolness of dusk had spread in the valley, raising wisps of fog from the winding creek.

"It must be very wearing to be a soldier," Phebe remarked as she viewed these primitive preparations.

"It can be," he replied, "and it can be pretty grim. But it does have its amusing side. These men have probably not had a good wash all summer, yet here they are, within shouting distance of the barracks, soap and hot water, clean and pressed uniforms, and they shine up in a creek to parade before the colonel. Spit and polish is a fine name for it!"

"It hardly seems reasonable."

"It isn't, but it's good discipline, which has a certain amount of the rational about it. It's pride, you see. They come riding into the fort looking like soldiers rather than vagabonds, and they feel as if they'd licked every tribe in the West! In a way, it's like bringing in scalps on your lance; only our men ride home on shining horses with their sabers polished. If we came in covered with dust and dirt, we'd look merely weary, perhaps even defeated, wouldn't we?"

"Yes, I suppose that's true." She fell silent for a moment, then asked hesitatingly, "Is it true that the soldiers take scalps, too?"

"What? Where did you hear that?" he asked curiously.

"Sergeant Maxwell was telling me only yesterday about one man in this detachment who has taken . . . oh, a dozen scalps in battle. I wanted to ask him more but he . . . he seemed suddenly bashful about it. I didn't know whether to believe him or . . . perhaps he was only joshing, though he does not seem a joshing man."

St. Clair was amused. "No, he's not a joshing man."

"Then it's true?"

"About the scalps? Yes. I think it's Private Mackett who has a handful and I know he's proud of . . ." He paused, seeing the troubled look on her tanned face.

"But how barbaric!"

"Yes," he agreed soberly, "it is barbaric. When you've seen more of this country, Miss Tanner, you'll find it's just that—barbaric! I suppose it brings out the worst, or at least, the most animal-like traits in men. Perhaps that's why the Indians are so savage in war; perhaps it's not so much that they're inherently savage as that the country makes them so. Back East they say that it's the lack of civilization that makes men out here so harsh and brutal, but I'm not sure. All this . . ." and he gestured westward with his hand, "the wide spaces, harsh lines, few trees, and little greenness . . . they're harsh and brutal in themselves and they make men lonely."

"My," she murmured, "thee sounds poetic."

He laughed, amused by the dryness of her tone. "No, I'm no poet, Miss Tanner. Nor a joshing man. Simply a soldier."

"Thee joshes me now. Yes, thee is a soldier, but not quite the soldier the sergeant is, I wager. He belongs very well to this land thou speaks of as harsh, while thee . . . thee has still the greenness of the East."

He laughed again, delighted. "Ah, how you wound me! I thought I looked every inch a veteran!" he exclaimed in mock pain, then added soberly, "For so young a lady you are quite astute. Yes, I am green, and much too civilized. It sometimes makes me uncomfortable, especially when I am placed side by side with such a man as Sergeant Maxwell! There is not a streak of green left in him, and, by the way, he's a fine soldier. However, I can see that he has been entertaining you with some bloody tales! I shall have to ask him to tone down his selection for the ladies."

"No! Please, do not even josh him about it. He has told them because he does not know what else to speak of; it is his life and a very interesting one. And," she added, "I would not have his feelings hurt for all the world."

"All right, but if you have nightmares I'll know their source."

She smiled. "Thee forgets I have good cause for nightmares without the sergeant's tales. But thee does not wholly understand when I say that thee is green and the sergeant is not. I do not mean it as

an unfavorable comparison. It seems to me he has always belonged here where it is harsh and dry and big, and he knows this, and sometimes he, too, is uncomfortable."

St. Clair struck his forehead. "Astute, did I say? My dear Miss Tanner, you are positively clairvoyant and you make me uneasy. What on earth will you say next?"

Phebe laughed and blushed, pleased with herself and proud to bring a note of interest into his voice. He had seemed rather frightening at first, so easy and sure of himself, so much a man of the world, and he had made her shy, even though, in his company, she felt gay, and conversation was a pleasant and simple affair. He was, she knew, what her uncle would have called a "natural gentleman," and her uncle would have known, she thought, for he was a gentleman himself, a Quaker gentleman, quiet and gentle and grave, though with little humor. "All the wit, my dear," he had often said to her, "went to my brother, thy father, and he, poor lad, tended it well while he could. When he married thy mother he married a gay bit of woman upon whom to sharpen his own wit, and hard put he was, sometimes, to keep up with her. Thee and Jen shall have to put a guard upon thyself lest thee laugh the world away."

And though he had brought her up simply and in deep faith, life had been a struggle between her love of pleasure, her recklessness and high spirits, and the sober tenets of her creed. More than once he had counseled, "My dear, the outward deed is not as important as the inward heart, Turn thy efforts inward and thy battle will be less distressing." Yet she had never found it to be less distressing.

Within the echo of her pleased laughter, Sergeant Maxwell came stumping through the dust, his face red with exertion, his shirt sticking to his body in wet patches of sweat. "If you're ready, sir," he said harshly, stung by the sound of the girl's amusement and struck by the contrast between himself and the cool, if dusty, officer.

"Ready?" St. Clair asked, puzzled.

"I reckon they're waiting to be inspected. And to hear you, sir."

"Hear me? But about what? I don't understand."

"I don't know, sir," Maxwell retorted sullenly, "except the officers thank them, and such."

Phebe felt a vague compassion for him. Off a horse, she noticed, he seemed much shorter and quite awkward. As though feeling her

gaze upon him, he fished a huge red handkerchief from his hip pocket and embarrassedly wiped at his streaming face, then balled the cloth in confusion, uncertain whether he'd done an unforgivably crude thing. He shifted his weight and tried to stow the handkerchief as inconspicuously as possible, his face flushing redder than ever. I guess I'd be looking like a damned bandbox mannikin if I'd been a-standing up here in the wagon shade! he thought furiously. I guess I'd not be sweating like a horse if I'd been here just talking to her! And an orderly down there polishing my gear! God damn him! He cast an envious, resentful glance at St. Clair's tall lean frame, on which even the dustiest worn uniform managed to achieve a kind of elegance. "If you're ready," he repeated shortly, turned on his heel, and stumped back into the dusty field.

"If you'll excuse me then," St. Clair said, turning back to the girl with a slight bow and a smile. "I find a little extra duty calls me." However, as he followed Maxwell into the field he was not internally as easy. The thought of standing before these men to thank them for their summer's duty, knowing what they thought of him, turned his mouth dry.

Phebe watched them walk along the waiting line of dragoons, pausing to examine each man's equipment and mount, and was struck by the difference in the two men; even their walk was exaggeratedly dissimilar. Maxwell stumped along unevenly on his boot heels, while St. Clair's stride was long and easy, his body erect but relaxed. There the difference lies, she thought, amused to find herself being . . . what had he called it? Clairvoyant? The one so tense and determined, the other easy and indifferent. Still, she was not wholly satisfied. That seemed too easy an answer. Was the lieutenant really so green and civilized, the sergeant so brusque and harsh? Jen, she knew, already thought the latter a hero of the plains, but then, it was Maxwell, after all, who had saved his life, and, too, for a week he'd been drinking in all his stories of danger and daring.

Meanwhile, in the field, Maxwell had given the order to mount, and for several minutes there was a confused prancing and whirling of horses, as the men settled themselves once more in their saddles and brought their animals under control. Watching them line the horses neatly before him, St. Clair wondered what he should and could say, what they expected him to say. Thank them, but for what? Doing their duty well, I suppose, he thought, and why not

thank them? Someone should. They won't get gratitude from the paymaster when we arrive at the fort, and they won't get it from the damned civilians in the town. The card sharks and gamblers, the whisky-men and the whores will be waiting on the levee to clean them out, not to offer thanks. How can they be such simpletons, such children, these men who are such pillars of strength on the plains? The idea of these tough, hardened soldiers losing their five months' pay overnight so disturbed him that he forgot all about his uneasiness, and when the guidons had been carefully unfolded from their keeper's saddle-roll and were fluttering in the breeze, he spoke up abruptly and out of no sense that he had failed them.

"It's been a long summer and, while difficult at times, a rewarding one." What guff, he thought absently, yet what else is there to say? Vaguely, he felt their thoughts center upon the missing men, but he hardly cared. "I have had the pleasure of commanding a very fine detachment of soldiers on my first campaign out here. You have conducted yourselves well and as seasoned soldiers should, and because you have done so, our missions have been successful." He hesitated, feeling again that uncertain drift, and wondered briefly if he should mention the missing men, if he should say he was sorry that they had not returned with their comrades, and that except for their loss, the summer's work as a whole could be considered well accomplished. No, he thought, deciding against any mention of the whole affair. These were men grown, hard as the baked ground of the prairie beneath their horses' hooves, and death was no new story. No need to explain, no need for sentiment; no need either, he thought wryly, to apologize. They had their own thoughts on the matter; they would hold to them in spite of anything he could say and would honor their dead comrades their own way.

So he went on to the other thing. "You are soldiers and men. You have proven yourselves worthy soldiers and brave men; therefore, why let the townspeople make fools and drunkards of you? Why let them have their way with your drunken carcasses? Remember, a man in his cups must be twice sly. Remember, too, that your pay was hard-earned. Make these folks waiting so eagerly for your money earn it as hard as it came by you. Remember, also, that it is no business of a dragoon's to fight the Free-Soil, pro-slavery battle, and he who forgets this is likely to spend his furlough in the guardhouse.

That's all." He waited a minute, standing erect, looking directly into their faces. He saw their sullen contempt and knew that he might as well have saved his breath. Shrugging, he turned to his horse, mounted, and raising his hand, gave the order to move out.

Behind him, the dragoons formed a column of twos and trotted out of the field and down the road into the shadow of Sentinel Hill. As he passed the wagon, Maxwell leaned from his saddle, shouting, "All right, son, bring it along!" and Jen, grinning, threw him a mock salute and sent the whip whistling over the backs of the oxen. Eagerness and anticipation in their weary faces, they turned the corner of the hill and almost overran a group of men on horseback, strung across the road.

SIX

The dragoons reined up abruptly as their momentum carried them into the group of horsemen. The latter had turned their heads to observe them, but had not moved, and for a moment the scene was confused, as the troopers brought their mounts to their haunches in an effort to avoid collision. Dust swirled, obscuring men and animals; there were shouts and curses as the dragoons bumped knees or caught one another's stirrups, and one man's carbine was torn from its scabbard. The wagon came around the curve just as the dust began to subside and the two groups draw apart. The civilians still sat their mounts stolidly, in an attitude of lazy indifference, feet shoved home in the stirrups, bodies slouched, forming closed ranks across the road.

A tall, slim young man on a gaunted gray glanced at each of the soldiers until he found the epaulets on St. Clair's shoulders. "I reckon you want to git on to the fort, huh, Lieutenant?" he asked, grinning.

"You're blocking a public highway, mister."

"We got business here," the civilian replied coolly. His mouth was thin and fierce in a heavy growth of black beard, and his eyes

were coal-like and hard. His whole face was narrow, narrow at the temples and narrow at the chin, as though a certain savage intensity had burned away every surplus ounce of flesh.

St. Clair saw the Negro then, standing in the dusty road, his arms pinned to his sides by loops of heavy rope, the ends held by the horsemen, who even as he watched tautened their lines, making the Negro stagger drunkenly to keep his balance. At the same time, a red-faced white man, also afoot, pushed frantically through the horsemen to reach St. Clair's stirrup. "You got to stop this, Lieutenant!" he cried hoarsely. "They ain't got no right to do this!"

St. Clair looked down at him, then shifted his gaze to the thin young man. "What goes on here?" he asked.

The other grinned and spat. "Nothing. Just caught a runaway nigger and figger on taking him back to Missouri where he belongs."

"That's a lie! He's a freedman. He's been free two or three years and has the . . . had the papers to prove it till this man tore 'em up!" The man on foot tugged at St. Clair's stirrup in his excitement. "You got to stop these fools, Lieutenant! They can't do this here! It ain't right!"

The young man's grin widened. "Look, mister," he said with mock patience, "I reckon it ain't none of the army's business in the first place, but in case you're figgering on making it your business, Lieutenant, we're all legal and proper. We been deputized by the state of Missouri to come a-nigger-hunting in the Territory, and we come. Hell, you think we're gonna miss one of these bastards when we get fifty dollars a head for bringing 'em back?" He laughed and reached indolently into the pocket of his shirt to withdraw a soiled, torn bit of paper which he extended towards St. Clair. "Here's our papers, Lieutenant, in case you got any questions."

Without touching the proffered credentials, St. Clair glanced at them briefly. He couldn't possibly know whether they were authentic or not, nor would it make any difference if he could. This pro-and-con struggle on the slavery question was, so far, a strictly civilian problem. The dragoons had no authority here. He could do nothing even if he wished to.

"They ain't got no right, legal or otherwise, to do this!" the man on foot insisted angrily.

St. Clair noticed that his clothes were dusty and torn and that blood hardened on a cut across his forehead. He shifted his glance

to the Negro, who at once began to mumble, "Please, suh . . . please, suh . . ." He said it over and over again. It seemed all he was able to say. His round face was grayish-black and glistening with sweat, his eyes were bloodshot, and he was powdered with the alkaline dust of the road. He was not young. Sickened, St. Clair looked over the horsemen, thinking, by God, I ought to give the order and smash these idiots from their saddles! Yes, and if there's a fight? And the dragoons wound a civilian? Kill one? No, nothing for it but to pass.

"Sergeant!" he said, turning in his saddle to call up Maxwell from his place by the wagon.

Maxwell rode up beside him, checking his horse while his hard blue eyes took in the scene, his dislike and contempt for these civilians plain on his sunburnt face. For him their insolence was enough, their barring of the road like the waving of a red flag, and his hackles were raised. He had never liked the mold which stamped out men like these—bearded, dirty, their slack faces complacent with the knowledge of their own power to mind no law. Almost to a man they were dressed in red shirts and butternut trousers, muddy boots, and leather belts with the inevitable pistols and bowie knives that bespoke the swagger of their small souls. He stared at them in plain animosity to find no eye stood up to his.

"Sergeant, take the men through!" St. Clair ordered curtly, feeling the other's enmity and half expecting his insubordination. He might have spared himself anxiety, for he was talking to an old soldier who knew duty first, inclination second.

"Yes, sir," Maxwell retorted, but held his horse a moment as the civilian leader, grinning broadly, told his men to move off the road. They maneuvered with deliberate leisure. The two men holding the ropes which encircled the Negro yanked their horses backward, bringing him to his knees, then jerked him sideways on his face into the dust and proceeded to drag him in this position to the edge of the road, where he struggled frantically to rise to his knees.

"Oh, don't! Don't!"

The eyes and the attention of the men shifted instantly. The young leader's grin broadened. He touched the brim of his battered hat and ordered sharply. "Git that damn nigger out of the road, boys. This here lady wants to pass on!"

The rope-holders guffawed, jerked again, rolling the frightened

colored man from his knees into the ditch. The girl's face went white with shock.

"All right, Sergeant, take the troop through!" St. Clair repeated sharply, disliking the situation.

"You ain't going to stop 'em from pressing a free man, Lieutenant?" the man on foot asked incredulously, staring up at St. Clair with stunned eyes.

"I'm sorry, but we haven't the authority to interfere in a civilian concern."

"Sorry?" the man cried, recovering himself. He spat into the road in front of St. Clair's horse and stepped back. "Listen, soldier, get and get quick before I forget there's so many of you dressed-up turkeys! If you can sit there and let a free Negro be pressed back into slavery, you'd sell a white man's soul just as damn fast! I'll take my chances with these goddam pukes!" He spun around and stamped off down the road, turning his back on them all. The horsemen laughed.

St. Clair stared after him, knowing that it would be a long time before he achieved peace of mind over this business. I am dogged by trouble, he thought. Yet no officer can take civilian law into his hands, nor judge the justice of that law, not to mention passing on the credentials of civil enforcement officials! No, I can't do anything here but pass on. He caught the brief, contemptuous, sidelong glance of his sergeant as he moved his horse past, giving the brusque order to the detachment to fall in and forward.

Uneasily St. Clair ranged his horse backward to take his place beside the wagon, wanting to escort the Tanners through the raffish group, but he was to find no peace there. The girl stared at him mutely in sheer disbelief, while her brother's pale face registered profound disgust. "I told thee he said that we would pass on!" Jen muttered to her angrily, averting his face as St. Clair leaned toward them from his saddle.

"Surely, Lieutenant St. Clair, we are not to go on and leave this poor man!"

A little irritably he exclaimed, "Miss Tanner, I'd like nothing better than to stop this right here and now and send these men packing back across the Missouri, but I can't. I'm absolutely powerless to lift a finger against them! Believe me, I have no authority to take action, and in the army if you have no authority to do a

thing, then you don't do it. It's hard, sometimes it's almost impossible, but that's the way the army operates. Otherwise, don't you think it likely we military men might end up managing civil affairs as well as our own?"

"Thee may be right," she replied in calmer tones, "when it comes to the law, but . . ." and she glanced at the frightened Negro forced to grovel in the dust. Her face grew paler. "But will he not be sold into slavery again? If the other gentleman is telling the truth, and he *was* a free man, then is this not a violation of his rights, and does not the army protect the citizen?"

He followed her gaze, then looked at the horsemen and knew the colored man's fate at a glance. He wondered briefly if they got their fifty dollars for the Negro dead or alive. "Yes," he replied simply, "we protect the citizen but only when specifically ordered to do so. Ever since the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, the freed Negro hasn't been safe in any state, North or South, yet the army cannot make this its business. So we must go on."

I don't understand, the girl thought, noticing Jen's averted face as St. Clair moved to help him whip up the oxen. I don't understand this man! Surely he can see the evil here! Resolutely she kept her eyes straight ahead as the wagon lurched forward, ignoring the bold stares and glancing sideways only for one last pitying look at the Negro. Ah, if I were a man, she thought, anger sending a hot rush of blood to her cheeks, if only I were a man I'd scatter this rough mob. If I were he, I'd order them to free that poor soul on pain of . . . of what, death? But would I? What if someone should pull a pistol or reach for a knife? What if someone were hurt, or killed? No, it would be all wrong. Even if I were a man I could not do it. Yet, would I be so—so aloof? She gazed at his profile but saw nothing there except a faint frown. Ah, could he not at least have shown them how he despised their cruelty? she wondered. A Quaker, she thought, though he may not strike a blow for his belief, speaks up for his faith even if it should bring down anger or worse upon his head! She could remember very clearly a scene from the preceding months when their wagon train was traveling across Missouri. A white man with a wagonload of milled lumber and five slaves walking behind had passed close to their camp.

"Friend," one of the several Quakers with the train had asked the man, pointing to a small, misshapen child who trudged beside its

slave mother at the wagon's tail, "why does thee not let the child ride?"

Thinking that he was being joshed, the man had laughed, but his smile had turned to a scowl as the other waited with quiet, unsmiling face. "What?" he had cried angrily. "Take up this bit of nigger sowbelly? Are you daft, man?"

"If for no reason of humanity, then to protect thy property?" the Quaker had persisted without change of expression.

"Property? This little bastard ain't property! Hell, this is a god-dam accident! Why, look at that there leg! Four inches shorter than t'other! Think that'd ever make a field-hand? Or earn its keep? Jesus, man, you're daft! Daft!" And because he had had no dealings with the Friends before, he went his way shaking his head in baffled rage.

No, she thought, a Quaker would not lift his hand to force his faith, but his conviction would give him the power to speak up though he be martyred for it!

Sensing something of what she was feeling, St. Clair restrained his horse so that he moved parallel to her, half-shielding her as they passed through the scattered horsemen. "You know, Miss Tanner, this whole business is very confused here in the Territory. As far as I've been able to tell, it's a matter of politics first, and morality second. Even the Free-Soil people passed a black law because they were afraid of the label 'Abolitionist.' Did you know that?"

"Black law? What is it?"

"A law denying the right of any colored man, free or slave, to live in Kansas. When both sides indulge in political maneuvers, jettisoning their proclaimed beliefs in the process, I have difficulty deciding who *is* right. A black law seems little more compassionate than a Fugitive Slave Law, or its equivalent."

She looked down at her hands, then ahead at the stiff backs of the dragoons posting in their saddles. "Yes," she replied slowly, "thee is right about that, of course, but still, as a person, does thee not think that one must follow the dictates of one's conscience? Will it not bother thee later that thee might have saved this Negro from being returned to slavery, and did not? Can thee be so sure of evil on both sides that thee feels it unnecessary to make a choice?"

"I was right," he said, smiling, but searching her face uneasily,

disturbed by the coolness of her tone, "you're very shrewd for so young a lady!"

"Perhaps thee believes in slavery?" she suggested quietly.

He shook his head. "No. Actually I haven't thought much about it, one way or another; not enough at least to believe in it or against it. In this case, however, I really have no choice. Having no authority to act, I cannot take either side. Such is the army, Miss Tanner."

Philip Maxwell, at the head of the column, disagreed violently. He would have acted and acted swiftly, if for no other reason than a desire to see the insolence drained from the Missouri men, and their pride draggled in the dust. When he rode past them he all but exploded with anger. The goddam insolent Southern trash! If, he thought savagely, I ever come across you Missouri Pukes again, with no white-livered officer to answer to, look to yourselves! And, as if in anticipation of that time, he looked full into each man's face as he passed. He paid especial attention to the leader, and his cold blue eyes met the hot black ones hard on. Before the other could move, he leaned far from his saddle and spat forcibly into the road by the gray's front hooves.

His anger relieved a bit, he had time for a momentary pity for the Negro. It was a transient emotion though, for he felt each man had to look out for himself, and he didn't hold much with do-gooding. He felt there was little one could do for other people except to refrain, insofar as possible, from actively making their lot worse. Thinking about it as he headed the column towards the fort, he told himself that Major Arnold, for instance, would have driven those damned civilians' arrogance into their teeth, authority or no authority! At the same time the major sure as hell would have seen to it that the colored man was dragged all the way to Missouri by the neck! Be that as it may, he thought angrily, I can't serve under a gutless wonder like this one! I'll put in for transfer out of the troop first chance I get!

SEVEN

Fort Leavenworth, founded almost thirty years earlier, was well situated on high bluffs overlooking the Missouri River. Originally a compact little post with blockhouses and loop-pierced walls, it had expanded to a sprawling half-fort, half-camp, with big brick and frame quarters, log stables, long, veranda-fronted barracks, warehouses and tents strung upon the open hills. In the valley of Corral Creek, thousands of mules and oxen belonging to the partners Majors and Russell, chief wagon-freighters for the army, were pastured.

Below the fort, on Three-Mile Creek, so named because it was approximately three miles from the fort's flagpole, mushroomed the still brand-new town of Leavenworth. It was a motley collection of frame and cottonwood-shingled houses, saloons, gambling dens, and stores, set along the creek and the river bank. Real estate was booming, new buildings constantly going up, new ruts being carved in new streets. And as long as the Missouri was free of ice, the steamboats came, bringing cargo from St. Louis and settlers from a hundred points. Here many a freight outfit made its start for Santa Fe and trading riches; here many a homesteader's wagon began the

long trek to Oregon. Here was the stronghold of the pro-slavery Law and Order men come to make Kansas in the image of Missouri. By whatever name these groups were known: Law and Order, Blue Lodge, Regulators, their aim was the same—to bring the Territory into the Union as a Slave state.

The fort itself had been *the* western outpost for many years. Even now, when other, smaller posts had been established further west, Fort Leavenworth was still the center of planning and supply for the Indian campaigns, and a staging and training center for the troops involved. Early each spring, hundreds of dragoons and mounted riflemen set off to their varied duties on the plains and beyond—guarding wagon trains, escorting settlers, patrolling the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails, pursuing and punishing war-parties—and each fall most of them returned to comparatively snug winter quarters at Leavenworth. From thaw to freeze-up huge army supply trains rolled westward from the fort to supply the dozens of small outposts. Councils for peace with the big chiefs and Indian agents were usually held here. Except for two or three months in the dead of winter, the post was thronged with people, supplies, wagons, and livestock. Wagon trains or detachments were either arriving or departing, and it seemed a hundred bugles rang each day.

Now, within sight of the outbuildings of the fort, the small detachment of dragoons from Troop B slowed their horses to a walk, straightened their column and began to sit self-consciously erect, proud and eager in their saddles. A sentry walking his beat near half a dozen storage tents saluted their approach. Soldiers, naked from the waist up and browned by the sun, straightened from their task of unloading supply cases from a wagon to call, "Get any scalps, boys?"

The dragoons returned the joshing in kind and rode on. At the rear of the column, the Tanners rode the high seat of their wagon, all eyes for this mecca for weary troopers. A dragoon rode beside their oxen to urge them on, and a second brought up the rear, driving in the cows and keeping an eye on the two horses tied to the wagon-tail.

And a mecca it is! Phebe thought with pleasure, her eyes gratefully drinking in the wide-shading trees and the coolness they spread across the green, short-cut grass. Jen's attention was caught by the cannon parked in rows beneath the trees, with triangular mounds

of balls beside them; then he noticed a group of men on horseback going through the maneuvers of a mounted drill on a dusty, level stretch of ground. "Look yonder, Phebl!" he cried in excitement. Across a long, shallow swale of grass where the shadows of a few trees lay long before the twilight sun loomed the permanent buildings of the fort, built in a hollow square around the parade ground. Horses and men raised dust along a road running on the edge of the bluff, while a heavy freight-wagon, drawn by sixteen mules, moved slowly down the pike toward the town of Leavenworth.

The detachment moved past the brick hospital, shaded by cottonwoods and walnuts, past Bedlam, the bachelor officers' quarters on the corner of the Main Parade, where a few idle officers leaned over the veranda rail to greet St. Clair. Here, the Tanners' escort brought the wagon to a halt, while the rest of the dragoons moved out under the trees, on past the sentry walking his post before the entrance of the underground magazine, to the big brick quarters with the two great double chimneys. Here they came to a halt, forming a single line before the wide porch. The bugler sounded "Retreat," Sergeant Maxwell had the men close ranks, and then began to call the roll. A soft, smoky wind stirred the leaves above his head as his harsh voice snapped out the names.

"Private Allen!"

"Here."

"Private Brown!"

"Here."

And down the small list:

"Private Miller!"

"Here."

"Corporal Miller!"

The silence was almost a voice speaking. Maxwell stood and let its lost echo drift with the wind, waiting a full minute before he went on, while St. Clair sat his horse before the thin line and looked straight above the heads of his men. He had a morbid vision of all the lonely crosses he had passed that summer, some half lost in a sea of grass, some in the dim shade of a twisted tree or straggling grove, some among the flinty rocks of a sun-cooked mesa, all pathetic traces of life come this far and halted, passed by and left behind. He remembered an old-timer's answer to a question he had asked about the number of graves with slanted crosspieces.

"No, it ain't no mistake, son, nor careless fellers in a hurry neither. It's got a meaning right enough, them pieces being thataway. Folks what died on the square, like, they got their crosspieces horizontal, but them fellers died with their boots on, well, they put their crosspieces on a slant. Don't rightly know how it got started. Reckon somebody wanted folks to know which poor soul died of cholera or the shakes, and which got a bullet or a knife in him."

Now, that's strange, St. Clair had thought, and found it strange again as he listened to Maxwell continue, pausing again for the silence to greet the names of the two dragoons dead of cholera, and finally, Private Smith, who shared the same red-rock and sand grave with Miller. When the sergeant had finished, he shouted abruptly, "Attention!"

St. Clair dismounted, handing his reins to his orderly, and turned toward the brick quarters just as three officers stepped out onto the porch above him. One, he saw as he snapped erect, saluting, was a general, and all three were strangers. Oh, Lord, he thought regretfully, his uneasiness returning in a rush, Colonel Sumner has been replaced!

"Good evening, Lieutenant," the general said pleasantly, returning his salute and motioning him to join them on the porch. "Ah, I don't believe we've met . . ."

"Second Lieutenant St. Clair, reporting, sir."

"I'm General Smith, sir, and this gentleman, Colonel Royce, is my executive officer, and Captain Blanding here is the new adjutant general. St. Clair, eh? Hmmm, that name has a familiar ring. Couldn't be any kin, I suppose, of the Randolph St. Clair who is the Secretary of War's able assistant, could it?" The general's tone was jovial, and St. Clair knew he expected nothing by way of answer and would have let the matter rest there, but an imp of his bruised ego pricked him sharply, a surge of uneasiness sent him searching for cover and he heard himself say, "My father, sir." He was neither surprised nor amused at the startled, almost agitated expression which crossed the general's face, and he would have given a great deal to have had the words back. Ah, my God, he thought in shame and self-disgust, what a fool I am! I need not have said that, I need not have done more than shake my head vaguely . . . or I could have lied. Instead, I ran for the safety I despise!

"Well, well," the general said dryly, "I hadn't been informed. Sometimes, you know, Lieutenant, I am very glad that as an army officer I have no politics. It often works out for the best. Now, then, you are reporting, sir?" he added briskly, turning his attention to the waiting detachment.

"Yes, sir."

"Come along, gentlemen." Followed by his two staff officers, General Smith moved down the stairs and out onto the shadowed parade ground. St. Clair hurriedly fell into step beside him and together they solemnly trooped the attenuated line.

"Hmmm, fine-looking men!" the general remarked as they returned once more to his porch. Then he turned to the waiting men and, leaning against the railing, spent fifteen minutes telling them what fine soldiers they were, while horses fidgeted, smelling corn, and weary men tried their best not to shift their aching rumps. When more than one of them was sure that he could not bear another minute, the general gave a final clearing of his throat and dismissed them abruptly.

"This was your first summer campaign, you say, Lieutenant?" he asked, turning again to St. Clair.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, see to your men and then please report to headquarters immediately after. I will wait and take a brief résumé of the report I wish you to prepare in full on your missions and their outcomes."

"Yes, sir." St. Clair saluted as the general turned away. Sweating, his heart thumping like that of a boy who's committed a folly and knows the outcome, he hurried down the steps, his temporary relief cancelled out by the prospect of the next hour. "Take my horse," he told his orderly. "See that he gets plenty of corn. Sergeant Maxwell, see to the men. I'll be in to inspect before 'Tattoo.'"

He was so obviously eager to be done with them that Maxwell, watching him hurry across the parade ground, felt all the anger and resentment of the last few days well up within him like a black tide. Just like that, and we're dismissed! he thought bitterly, and I'm to see to barracks assignment, messing, and all the rest of it, while he goes off free as the damn breeze! By God if I'll let him cut me out like that! Leaving me his work to do and no chance to tell her! Angrily, he swung around, giving the harsh command for the men to follow. He set off across the parade ground at a brisk

trot, passing the officer without a glance, and went on to the wagon beneath the trees. Under pretext of giving orders to the two dragoons still detailed there, he rode up beside the waiting Tanners and, leaning from his saddle, blurted, "Ma'am, if you ain't got no plans, I've a friend, a sergeant here, who's got quarters at the fort, and his wife would sure be pleased to take you and your brother in 'till you figure something. . . . It ain't but a short piece from here and I reckon I could . . ." He stumbled to a halt, notwithstanding the fact that he had been rehearsing this small speech for three days.

Phebe was touched, pleased, and embarrassed. His last awkward words especially moved her and she broke in gently, "That is very kind of thee, Sergeant. I thank thee so much. It is truly kind of thee to give thought to my brother and me. We would be very pleased to stay with thy friend, but . . ." She hesitated, seeing the quick light spread across his face, only to die at that final word.

At that moment St. Clair came hurrying up to the wagon. "Sergeant," he said brusquely, "I forgot to tell you that these two men will need to stay with the wagon for a few minutes while I take Miss Tanner and her brother over to Major Arnold's quarters. They'll be staying there for . . ." He broke off in amazement as Maxwell cried hoarsely, "Yes, sir," and without waiting for him to finish, swung his horse on its haunches and set off at a trot for the log stables at the south end of the Main Parade. The detachment moved off behind him, leaving their lieutenant staring.

"What . . ." he began, when Phebe interrupted gravely, "I'm afraid I've . . . we've hurt his feelings dreadfully," she said. "Oh, dear, I would not for the world embarrass him!"

"Embarrass him? Why would you?"

"He had just offered me—Jen and me—a place to stay. A friend of his has quarters here at the fort, he said, and I was just about to explain to him that thee had . . ."

"When up I tramped and broke the news!" St. Clair stared after Maxwell's ramrod back as he posted off and thought, Lord, how touchy the fellow is! You'd think he was in love . . . Love? He turned back to stare at the girl. But of course! What a dunce I am! That explained all his fierce stares and sullenness whenever anything came up which concerned her. Contritely, he thought of the many times he must have ridden roughshod over the man's feelings.

"Shall I go after him and thank him on your behalf?" he asked. "No, there's too much confusion over there now. I'll talk to him this evening and do my best to explain." At the stables across the square, the detachment was already dismounting and men were milling about, removing tack and equipment while the rest of Troop B had turned from stable call to greet them. No use trying to talk to Maxwell now.

"Please, if thee would be so kind," she said, her voice troubled. "I would not willingly hurt him."

However, the hurt was already inflicted, and Maxwell had ridden away with his wound and his fury. She'll be beholden to him and the goddam major, he thought. Then what time will she have for ordinary soldiers once she's got used to officers' fancy ways? He'll be having dinner with her tonight, he'll see to that! Candles and silver, like as not. Ahhhh! He hawked and spat into the dust and rode on without a backward look. When he reached the stables and dismounted, he suddenly realized that he was bone-tired.

Back at the wagon, a cow lowed nervously and Phebe flushed, aware of the curious stares of a group of passing soldiers.

"I am glad thee came back so quickly," she told St. Clair as he helped her from the high wagon seat. "I was beginning to feel conspicuous, like a pioneer camped on the streets of Philadelphia."

He laughed. "Well, you needn't feel that out of place! Fort Leavenworth is crawling with wagons, bawling cows, *and* pioneers! At the moment, you're sitting on top of the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails just before they separate. Believe me, you're quite in keeping with the background."

"Oregon Trail? But I think we came through St. Joseph. I know we did not pass through here," she protested doubtfully.

"That's correct, for this is only an alternate. The main trail does go through St. Joe, while the main Santa Fe Trail is to the south through Westport. This route is much used by freighting wagons. Well, on to the Arnold quarters. Jen, are you ready for a decent bed and a bath at last? And do you have any necessary baggage we should take along?"

Phebe indicated a large cloth bag on the seat. "That's all we need. Thee put in a clean shirt, Jen?"

The boy grinned and mocked, "Yes, Ma!"

"Jen! Thee is feeling much too well!"

St. Clair laughed. "Now then, you two, if you want any dinner you'd better cease this bickering and come along. The Arnolds live over there in that whitewashed building. It's a double set of quarters, and another major occupies the left half." He pointed out a long two-story building fronted by a veranda and shaded by handsome trees.

The girl hesitated. "Is thee sure that we will be welcome? Is there not a hotel in the town where we could stay rather than trespass on a stranger's hospitality?"

"Yes, Leavenworth boasts a hotel now, but I'm afraid it's hardly fit for young ladies. It has only a common sleeping room where gentlemen to the tune of forty-odd spread their blankets."

"Oh dear, that would never do!"

He smiled at her wry tone and added, "That's not all. You and Jen are very plainly Quakers and your welcome would be rather mixed, I'm afraid. The town is mainly pro-slavery, and they're inclined to be quick with the tar and feathers. At least, so I've heard. I was here only a few short weeks before we left for our summer campaign and I didn't have much chance to see for myself."

"Well, *that* would certainly not frighten us!" she declared in a hardy voice, and Jen nodded in agreement, glancing sideways at the officer, for he had not gotten over his disgust and disappointment that the dragoons had sidestepped what he thought would be a real fight, for though Jen was a Quaker, he was also a boy with a boy's belief in righteous force. As they neared the quarters, however, uncertainty and shyness crept into Phebe's voice again. "I trust thee when thee says this lady will not mind taking in two strangers?" This was said more as a question than a statement and St. Clair hastened to reassure her once more.

"Please, she is an old, old friend of mine. In fact, she and I grew up next door to each other in Maryland. She will not only not mind taking in two such charming strangers, she will be pleased, for I know she finds garrison life here rather boring, and welcomes any change or new face."

The girl nodded, not wholly reassured. The evening shadows were long over the thick, green grass of the Main Parade, and somewhere in the big white dragoon barracks a man was singing. Lamps were lit here and there among the buildings, and their small, mellow pools spread through the leaves. Mourning doves in the eaves

sent out their sad calls, the last rays of the sun gleamed dully on a row of polished brass cannon, and a horse's hooves pounded hard on the surface of a road. It all seemed very unreal to Phebe and even too peaceful, for though she felt a profound relief at arriving safely, and at Jen's rapid recovery, she also felt an unutterable loneliness beneath the burden of her new responsibilities. And she was frightened. What were she and Jen to do now? Where could they go?

"Pheb, look at all the cannon!" Jen whispered.

She smiled, her anxiety momentarily lifting. "Now, then, Jen, thee be no soldier," she replied softly.

EIGHT

St. Clair lifted the brass-eagle knocker three times and listened to the sound roll through the house. Light, filtered dark red by heavy curtains, poured from an open window farther down the porch. Inside, voices merged with approaching footsteps and he felt the girl beside him tense, holding her breath. He smiled, amused, yet touched by her predicament. "Don't forget," he whispered, "Mary Arnold and I are old friends."

Beyond the door a woman's voice called, "I'll go, Rachel." A second later the hinges creaked and light fell across St. Clair's face.

"Larry!"

"Hello, Mary."

"Larry! Oh, my, how wonderful to see you! Come in! Come in!" Her face still in shadow, the woman extended her arms to draw him into the hall, exclaiming over and over again in pleasure, "Oh, mercy, how good to have you back! No wounds? No scars? Let me look at you . . . There! Just as fine and handsome as ever!"

Embarrassed by this effusive and obviously very personal greeting, the Tanners drew back slightly into the shadows of the porch. Oh, dear, Phebe thought forlornly, this is dreadful. We are not nearly

elegant enough for this house. She cannot possibly want us here, even if they are old friends. Oh, I should not have let ourselves impose so. Helplessly she wished herself a thousand miles away, and the wider the door opened upon highly polished floors and rich carpets, the shabbier and more dejected she felt.

"It's more than good to see you, Mary," St. Clair replied warmly, "but wait a moment, I've brought company," and he half turned to bring his charges into the light.

"Company?" Mrs. Arnold asked, confusion replacing her pleasure, and as the light revealed the two disheveled young Tanners, a note of coolness entered. "Company, Larry? I don't understand."

"Miss Phebe Tanner and her brother, Jen, Mary." Unperturbed, St. Clair shepherded the two into the hall. As she stepped back, the light struck Mary Arnold's face and her dismay and bewilderment were only too obvious. Phebe's heart sank.

"I found Miss Tanner and her brother out on the prairie, so to speak," St. Clair hastened to explain, and was instantly conscious that this was hardly an explanation, and worse, sounded patronizing. He could feel the girl's arm stiffen beneath his hand and was further disconcerted. "I mean we . . . the detachment . . . came across them not far from Riley. Young Jen here was very ill, and Miss Tanner was trying to care for him as well as for several other people. Since their wagon train could not wait for Jen to recuperate, we brought them back to the fort. I thought, if it was convenient for you, Mary, that you might be able . . . I knew that you wouldn't mind . . ."

As he began to flounder, made awkward by his sympathy for the girl's constraint, not by any need to justify his case to Mary, Phebe spoke up softly but firmly, "I think it only fair to tell thee, Mrs. Arnold, that Jen was ill with the cholera." For a brief moment she was almost hopeful that this stylish lady would turn them away at once, allowing her to escape this distressing situation. She was not used to begging board and room, nor having anyone else beg it for her. Her pride faltered, and she wished she could turn and lose herself in the night.

Perhaps she did come close to escape, for Mrs. Arnold turned pale and retreated a step, exclaiming, "Oh, dear!"

Phebe flushed and looked at St. Clair. "Does thee not . . ." she began timidly, but he cut her off.

"Nonsense, Mary, the boy's well over it! There's no danger now. None at all!"

There was a hint of both impatience and disappointment in his voice, and the older woman heard and heeded. All summer, as her boredom and restlessness mounted, she had looked forward to his return. There were many reasons why he, especially, suited her mood and this particular time in her life. She was wise in the ways of politics and social standing, and was exceedingly ambitious for her husband's future. She knew very well the worth of the St. Clair name in Washington. Yet she was not entirely cold-blooded, for St. Clair had once been in love with her, and she once pleased enough to have him so. When he had turned up in Leavenworth last spring, handsomer than she had remembered, and far more debonair, life had suddenly seemed very pleasant, and she was able to endure the long summer when most of the officers were out on campaign by planning eagerly for the fall and his return. She would have a great many parties for him, she decided. She would be the one to introduce him to the fort. Ah, how much more she preferred the company of men than women, and how fine it would be to have an old friend, an old, old friend, out here in this rough borderland! After all, she was Southern-born; the gallantry of men was as necessary to her as air, and she found her pleasure and excitement in the natural give-and-take between man and woman.

It was little wonder that it took her only a second to recover her poise, only a slight effort to cry, "But of course! What am I thinking of? How dreadful of me! Please, come in. Please! You must forgive me, Miss Tanner, but Larry has taken me completely by surprise. Rachel! Racheell! Here, do let me take your shawl. Oh, wherever is that girl?" She clapped her hands impatiently, her soft Southern drawl gone a little shrill as she cried again, "Racheell!"

"Please, do not trouble thyself. . . . We . . . I . . ." Phebe began shyly, but broke off as a young mulatto girl came hurrying from the back of the house. Oh, dear, what's the use, she thought wearily, seeing Jen's pale face. Meekly she surrendered, allowing herself to be led deeper into the house and committed to Mrs. Arnold's hospitality. She gave St. Clair a grateful look as he suggested, "Jen, here, is pretty fagged, Mary. Let's pack him off to bed."

"Oh, of course!" Mrs. Arnold exclaimed, concerned. "The poor boy looks ready to collapse! Rachel, take this young man up to the

trunk room at once, and see that he has plenty of warm water for his bath. The trunk room, my dear," she explained, turning to the girl and placing a very small, white hand upon her arm, "is not very elegant and is full of trunks, but it does have a comfortable bed. I shall put you in the blue room just up the hall from your brother, so that if he needs you in the night you will be near. Would you care to wash up a bit and see your brother safely to bed?"

Overwhelmed, Phebe could do no more than nod. She wanted only to escape this effusion, this concern and strangeness, and her own embarrassment. Obediently she followed the servant girl, Jen at her heels.

"Thank you, my dear," St. Clair said when they had gone. He smiled down into the pretty, triangular face, relieved to have his responsibility lifted.

She laughed. "Why, Larry, I'm very glad to help, and feel flattered that you should have turned to me. But come, tell me about your summer. You will stay to dinner, won't you? I can't promise that Harry will be here. He's gone on some sort of expedition to Kickapoo, to catch deserters, I believe, and won't be back for a week or more. It would be a fine opportunity to talk over old times, Larry. . . ."

"I'd like nothing better, but first I must answer the call of duty and make a report to the general. It shouldn't take long. By the way, where's the colonel now?"

"He's posted here at the fort still, but he spends his time running around the countryside trying to keep peace among the hotheads!"

"Hotheads?"

"Oh, mercy, these awful Abolitionists. They seem to be pouring into Kansas, bent on making trouble. But I know little enough about the army, Larry, not to mention politics. Fortunately, for Harry at least, the colonel's been replaced as post commander by the general."

"Fortunately?"

"Well, yes, for it was the colonel, you know, who reprimanded Harry. Harry never would have had any trouble if it hadn't been for the colonel, and I can only think him vindictive to have done such a thing!"

"I've heard only rumors about that, Mary."

"Poor Harry is fit to be tied. All these little patrols and escorts

are a dreadful comedown, and I think he feels it deeply. It certainly doesn't improve his disposition!" She sighed, moving a little restlessly. "But come, I know you must rush off; only, Larry, it would seem you've spent your summer well, finding pretty young ladies stranded on the prairie! Did you really find them on the prairie? Are they emigrants then?"

He laughed. "Yes, I really found them, or, more to the truth, my sergeant did. In a fashion, I suppose they are emigrants, although I hardly think they fit the usual pioneering mold. They're Philadelphia Quakers, and were on their way to Oregon when the older people—an aunt and uncle, I believe—died of the cholera. Miss Tanner had planned to be a schoolteacher out there, though she seems rather young for that, I would think."

"Perhaps," Mary Arnold drawled, giving him a sharp look.

"Yes, but this is too pleasant," he said, rousing himself. "I must see that the general gets the very latest word from the plains. Are you sure it won't inconvenience you to wait dinner?"

"It will be set to fit your clock. Go now that you may return the quicker!" She accompanied him to the door, standing on the threshold, framed in the light, as he descended into the night, and for many minutes she stood there listening to his retreating boot-heels on the flagged walk until they were lost in the grass of the parade ground.

What a handsome devil Larry is, she thought with a smile, and humming a tune, turned back into the house to run lightly up the stairs. She came upon the boy, watching from the doorway of the trunk room, as the mulatto girl turned down his bed. A good deal of the small room *was* taken up by trunks, big and little, brass-bound and hob-nailed, and all neatly strapped and polished. There was room, however, for a low post cherry bed with rope springs, a table with earthenware pitcher and bowl, and a straight, hickory-bark chair in the single empty corner. Cool night wind pushed white curtains in and out at the open window and the room seemed altogether snug and cheerful.

"Jen, is it?" she asked, catching the boy by the hand. She was touched by the white tiredness of his face, so thin and young, in which the dark-blue eyes seemed enormous. What a handsome lad! she thought, amused at the repetition of her observations. Aloud, she said, her soft voice gone authoritative, "Rachel, do hurry! As

soon as you've washed and hopped into bed, Jen, she will bring you some dinner, and then you can sleep to your heart's content. Won't that do very well?"

Jen blushed and nodded, grateful and embarrassed in turn. Her kindness brought tears to his eyes, yet, at the same time, he was acutely aware of his dirty hand within her own small white one, of his stained and rumpled clothes beside her wonderfully clean and fragrant dress. "Thee . . . thee might get dirty," he protested weakly, giving his hand a timid tug to free it.

"Thee? Oh, Larry did say that you and your sister were Quakers. And from Pennsylvania? But of course. Do Quakers come from anywhere else?"

Jen nodded, too dazed to answer. He was intensely grateful to her, yet he could not help wishing that she would leave him, for he was weary enough to drop. Her energy flowed over him, all but suffocating him. She was small, not many fractions of an inch taller than his own lanky height, and very slender. Her hair and her eyes were dark, and her skin very white in contrast, while her most remarkable feature was her heavy, black brows, very straight and thick, giving her small, slightly sharp face an intensity it might not otherwise have had. All her movements were quick and decisive, and in odd contrast to the soft, slow laziness of her voice.

"Poor Jen, what a long way from home you are!" she murmured. "I can remember when we came on from Washington, and I thought we never would get here! When we finally did arrive, I was so coated with grime from the steam engine and the boat that I declare you could not have told me from a nigger! Rachel, do hurry with that hot water!"

Jen stared at her mutely. For the life of him he could think of nothing to say. She seemed not to mind, however, but went on chatting about her trip west and its horrors. The boy thought that he liked her, but she made him so uneasy. He preferred, he guessed wearily, quiet girls like his sister. Not that she didn't laugh and joke a lot, but she was quiet for long periods and she never chattered.

Sometimes, when she was preoccupied, it was even difficult for him to make himself heard through whatever it was she was thinking. He'd never before met anyone quite like Mrs. Arnold, and he could not help his sigh of relief as she moved at last toward the door.

"Good night, then, Jen," she said graciously. "If you need anything, just ask Rachel and she will fetch it. We'll see you at breakfast, unless, of course, you'd rather sleep, which might be really for the best. You look so very tired!" She softly closed the door upon him and was gone.

Phebe shared her brother's uneasiness when, half an hour later, she found herself sitting on the edge of a chair, watching her hostess sip sherry with evident relish, and half listening to her languid small talk. This is a lady of manners, she thought, glancing shyly around the room and feeling both constrained and impressed against her will. Furniture gleamed richly in the shadows cast by the lamps, and an English carpet was thick and soft beneath her feet. A large oil painting of a handsome woman, older than her hostess but bearing a striking resemblance, hung above the mantel, while several portraits of lesser size were spaced about the walls. In these, too, she saw a family likeness. . . . Obviously, she thought idly, a little amused, the major has no ancestors on display. Perhaps none to display! And she was not aware of exactly how right she was. Ancestors in oil or in myth did not intimidate her, for her own family was old enough to boast their share. Her attention wandered again as she listened, only half hearing, wishing St. Clair would return. Firelight danced upon the walls and wove a shimmering golden crown above her head, making her warm and drowsy. Muted by the thick log-and-plaster walls, a bugle sounded as though from very far away.

"Larry tells me that you are a schoolteacher, Miss Tanner?" she heard the other woman say, and realized suddenly that she was waiting for a reply. Phebe sat up straighter, rousing herself from pleasant lethargy.

"Why, no, not exactly, Mrs. Arnold," she replied softly. "I had hoped to be when we reached Oregon." What a lovely color the wine is! she thought, her gaze coming to rest on the decanter on the table near her hostess. How strange that anything so beautiful could be such a great evil! And what a funny country girl I am, she thought wryly, to consider this poor lady depraved because she has a glass before dinner! Wouldn't she laugh if she knew!

On her part, Mary Arnold surveyed her guest amiably, missing none of the effect the room had had upon the girl. She was pleased, for she liked this room and liked the things that were hers here.

She saw the girl's eyes stray to the portraits and smiled, preening a little, proud anew of being a Bishop. A pretty girl this, she thought, and obviously an intelligent one, and quite well-bred. But, oh, Quakers! What a gray lot in general! And how forlorn to wish life to be so simple!

"Wouldn't you like a glass of sherry, my dear? I'm sure it wouldn't hurt you one bit," she suggested, knowing the girl would refuse as she had the first time, yet feeling a wicked urge to tempt.

Phebe flushed, sure that her mind had been read, and shook her head. She looked down at her hands folded in her lap, her tired mind casting about for something to say. If only he'd come back, she thought dispiritedly.

"I wonder what on earth can be keeping Larry!"

Again, Mrs. Arnold seemed to be seeing straight into her thoughts. Phebe began to feel acutely uncomfortable. She was tongue-tied before the other's light and easy chatter; she could think of nothing to say, and wished with growing desperation for St. Clair's return. Mary Arnold, too, grew a little restless. Still talking lightly, now about the fort and her life here, she rose and fiddled with the tassel of a curtain, then walked to the large table and smoothed the cloth around the lamp.

"One must be so careful to maintain one's way of life out here on the border," she said, letting her fingertips stray across the soft, well-polished wood. "It can be very hard sometimes; there is so much dust and dirt and so little to do with. I have only two servants, which is not nearly enough for all the entertaining I must do for my husband's sake. Still, too many women relax their standards and grow slovenly." She said "servants" and Phebe, who had never been in a house where there was any other class of help, accepted that.

Footsteps sounded on the porch beyond the windows, and Mary Arnold moved quickly toward the door, interrupting her own monologue with a delighted cry, "Ah, here's Larry now!"

Neither woman was prepared for the stunned expression on his face as he came into the warm and lighted room.

NINE

Post headquarters was located in the cellar of the commanding officer's quarters, and when St. Clair arrived he had found the offices empty, except for a weary sergeant-major who ushered him into the general's presence and stood to one side, silently bewailing his luck. The one big faro night in town and this goddam detachment had to arrive! Pay records! Re-ups! Furlough papers! Ach! Resentment was cast heavily across his sunburnt face, so that even the general might read it there if he wished.

His own face showing none of his uneasiness, St. Clair came to attention before the general's desk and, saluting, reported.

"At ease, Lieutenant. Now, then, this is a brief of your missions and their requirements, eh? And you've listed equipment lost, I see, and your casualty list. Two died of cholera, eh? Too bad. Damned disease hit us here at the fort pretty hard this summer, though, of course, nothing like the trouble out at Riley. Two men to the Cheyenne? Ran into a fight, eh? Corporal Aaron Miller? Hmmm, damned fine soldier, I believe. Been out here a long time, hadn't he, Sergeant McLeish?"

"Yes, sir," the sergeant-major replied indifferently.

"Tell me about this engagement with the Cheyenne, Lieutenant. According to your report here, this is the only time you made contact with unfriendly Indians, and it so happens we've had difficulties with the Cheyenne in several places this summer. A troop had a hard, running fight with a war-party north of the Platte, had one man severely wounded, but no other casualties. Lucky at that, I imagine."

St. Clair braced himself. Now it comes, he thought. "Well, sir," he began slowly, conscious that he was tired, and that his mind was already fumbling badly among all the thousands of words he had used in arguing with himself, conscious, too, that he was not sorting them properly, and that already he felt defeated. "Well, sir, the two men, Corporal Miller and Private Smith, left camp for an early-morning hunting trip. We'd been without fresh meat for some time, and I guess they were impatient with the ration situation. They crossed the South Platte after a small band of antelope we'd sighted the preceding afternoon. The Cheyenne war-party had been following us for several days—we were able to see their scouts on the bluffs across the river from time to time—and Mr. Scarsdale, our guide, estimated their strength at about five hundred braves." With an effort he slowed, recollecting himself, realizing that nothing he was saying fell into the proper sequence, and that he was already trying to justify himself. He could almost hear it in his voice. "As soon as the Cheyenne caught our two men," he continued more carefully, "they began to send up smoke signals, taunting us with what they intended to do to Miller and Smith. It was my opinion then, sir, that they were deliberately trying to draw us out in a rescue attempt, that they wished me to use dragoons for this purpose so as to cut down the detail guarding the train. It was obvious that they had been following us in the hope of attacking, but had been deterred by our strength and I . . ."

"Just a minute, Lieutenant. I don't quite understand the situation," the general interrupted curtly, a small frown gathering between his whitened eyebrows. "You were followed up by a war-party of large proportions for several days. These two men, Miller and . . . Smith," he consulted the papers upon his desk briefly, "were sent out for game and were captured, is that it?"

"Not quite, sir." St. Clair wished desperately he could push away the fog of fatigue and fatalism which left him numb and

almost indifferent. "Corporal Miller and Private Smith disobeyed orders by going after game. In leaving our camp site, crossing the river into the area of the war-party, they were disobeying explicit orders, my orders."

"Oh? And were captured?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you engaged the Cheyenne then in an effort to rescue them? Frankly, Lieutenant, this is the part that confuses me here in your report. I can't get the picture. . . ."

St. Clair's heart turned cold, he could feel sweat bead his forehead and a tremor start in his fingertips. With an effort he tried to pull his thoughts together. "No, sir," he replied doggedly, "I felt that this is exactly what the Cheyenne wanted me to do; I felt that the Cheyenne chief planned to draw me into a rescue try for the express purpose of ambushing my split force and overrunning the train. I felt that with a command as small as mine it would be suicide to send even as few as half a dozen men after Smith and Miller."

"So that no rescue attempt of any kind was made, eh? You could not and did not draw the Cheyenne into even a limited engagement, by way of retaliation if nothing else?" the general insisted, with a sideways glance at the waiting sergeant.

"Sir, by the time we'd reached an area where maneuver might be possible, the bodies had been returned, lashed to Corporal Miller's horse, and I felt . . ."

"Just a minute, Lieutenant!" The general stood up abruptly behind his desk. "You may go, Sergeant McLeish. I won't be needing you further tonight. Come in early in the morning to complete the paper work for B Troop. Good night."

"Yes, sir. Good night, sir. Good night, Lieutenant." The sergeant-major saluted and spun around. God damn it to hell! he thought, finding fresh cause for complaint. I stand around all the goddam night and just when he's about to ream an officer straight to hell, out I go! "You may go, Sergeant!" he mimicked savagely beneath his breath as he closed the door noiselessly behind him.

When he was gone, the general turned to St. Clair. "Lieutenant, this whole affair is very unfortunate. I'm afraid that you've made a great mistake here. At least, so it appears from your own account and from this brief report you've given me. Now let me understand

this clearly. No engagement was made with the war-party? These two men lost were captured and tortured to death, and this over a period of . . . how many days?"

"The bodies came back on the third day, sir."

"My God, man! And what did you do in the meantime . . . wait . . . or continue on your way?"

"We waited half a day, then went on, sir. My orders were to bring the train into Fort Laramie with all possible dispatch and I . . ."

"Did you send anyone at all out after these men? To look for them when you first found them missing, let's say?"

"I sent several men into the immediate area after I found them missing at reveille that morning, but no one across the river." St. Clair was beginning to despair of ever making himself understood. His body and face were wet with his effort, but even in his own ears his voice sounded thin. He had been over this whole thing so many times that he could not summon now an ounce of energy to express concern or regret, or even sincerity, and because he felt himself already prejudged, he sank, though still struggling, into apathy. "Sir," he began, making one more effort, "we'd been followed for four days by the war-party. We saw them plainly again and again across the river, and I knew that they were waiting for a favorable opportunity to make an attack. I gave the order that no man was to move out of sight of our camps, or out of sight of the train itself. I expected an attack at any moment."

"Were you attacked, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir."

How he hated the hesitation that had insinuated itself between the opening of his lips and the coming of his voice! My God, he thought dismally, surely I believe in myself! Surely I know I did the right thing at the time? Or, do I?

The general had picked up a brass paperweight from his desk and was tossing it idly from hand to hand. He glanced at the younger man curiously and coldly, then looked down at the weight in his hand. "And your men, Lieutenant, how do they feel about the matter?"

"I don't believe that they understand it completely, sir. I don't believe that they really tried to understand what we were up against. They got pretty mad about what happened to Miller and Smith, and I think they lost sight of the total situation."

"Most of them are veterans of Indian warfare," the general remarked dryly. "You would say, then, that they resented the fact that no rescue attempt was made, and—this is important, Lieutenant—that no effort was made, then or later, to punish the Cheyenne for the murder of two United States dragoons?"

St. Clair hesitated again, this time for almost a minute, then said quietly, "Yes, sir, I would say that they resented it very much."

The general exploded. "Of course they did! These are the First Dragoons, Lieutenant, and one of their traditions is that they never lose a man without a fight! They're a proud bunch of men and they believe in dash, not caution, which is one of the reasons they've been able to keep the tribes more or less quiet these last years."

With a visible effort he brought face and voice under control, and resumed his seat behind the desk. "Experience is a great teacher, Lieutenant, and I hope you will consider that you have learned one of its many lessons. Out here, an officer does not desert his men. He must not, and cannot, leave them in the hands of the Indians without at least an attempt to save them. Even though he knows that any attempt at rescue is either too late or completely futile, he must try, and for two reasons. The first is that the Indian is a savage, and what he does to his prisoners is far from pleasant, and the second reason is that he must know himself punished for daring to lift his hand against the white man. If you could have inflicted only one or two casualties on that band it would have been enough to show 'em. As it is, the next wagon trail they cut, they'll not be concerned by the thought of punishment, but only the fun they can have with a few prisoners. If they once think the dragoons will ride on and let 'em collect the scalps of the dead, not to mention torture the living, they'll give us no end of trouble!"

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Well, I shall have to transfer you out of B Troop. You can have no idea how damned touchy these old soldiers can get! Perhaps I ought to add that they're a third reason for making a try, no matter what the odds. You'll find the dragoons, to a man, Lieutenant, jealous of their reputation, and on this account, I'm sorry as hell for you!"

"But, sir, any attempt I could have made would have cost more lives . . . at the very least . . ."

"Of course, of course. I know that. So did your men, but they wouldn't have cared as much as losing their reputation and knowing that a bunch of dirty Cheyenne were laughing at 'em. I'll have to transfer you, Lieutenant. Tomorrow morning report to Captain Green at K Troop. You may not care for the assignment. Major Arnold has G and K Troops patrolling the Territory, keeping peace among these insane civilians. That's all. Good night, sir." The general turned his attention almost at once to a new sheaf of papers on his desk.

"Good night, sir." There was nothing for St. Clair to do but salute and leave. As he walked up the stairs and into the night his sense of shock and numbness gave way to consternation. "... desert his men . . ." the general had said, but my God, I did not desert them, he almost cried aloud. Was I to doom others to make a false appearance of rescue? Was I to chance losing the whole command to inflict token punishment on the Cheyenne? Why, one man, two men less . . . two rifles less and that much harder to protect the train! Wasn't *that* my mission? "I'm sorry as hell for you" he'd said. What did he mean? That they'll think me a coward? That they'll think what I did or didn't do was because of cowardice? But what else could he have meant? The sweat on his forehead turned cold. Was that what his men thought? Not that he was green, not that he had made the wrong decision, but that he had made a coward's one?

"My God!" he whispered, feeling sick and defeated, and by the time he reached the Arnold quarters he knew well enough what lay ahead.

TEN

St. Clair took the small bay mare around the packed drill field one more time, trotting her out smartly, pushing her into a lazy canter, then letting her drop to a walk again. He brought her to a halt near the tie-rails, ignoring the derisive grins of half a dozen dragoons lounging on stable duty as he swung to the ground. News gets around fast, he thought with a sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach.

No longer a member of B Troop, he had had to turn in his sorrel mount at stable call and had come over to the quartermaster stables to draw a replacement. B Troop alone rode sorrel horses, as nearly matched as pride could get them.

Throwing the reins over the mare's head, he handed them to his waiting orderly, saying shortly, "She'll do. Take her up to K Troop stables, Anson."

He waited a moment, watching the man lead away the well-coupled little mare, deliberately exposing himself to the indolent troopers. He was aware of their whispering, and heard one of them clear his throat and spit. It might or might not have been for his benefit, but he was sure it was. He turned slowly and walked up the bluff to the quartermaster's office to sign for his new mount.

"I know that little mare. Good choice, Lieutenant," the quartermaster captain remarked laconically. "Damn fast animal! Get you away from those red devils in good time."

St. Clair looked up sharply, but the other's face was bland. My God, he thought, am I to read censure into everything that's said to me or around me? With an effort he tried to pull himself together, realizing how badly shaken he was. The general's reaming the evening before had unnerved him, and he was not, he knew, entirely rational about the situation. Yet by evening he could be almost sure that everything he imagined being said about him was being said, that the oblique stares, the cold nods, the snubs were real. At each new onslaught against his ego he alternated between anger and shame, and only his physical weariness at the end of the day brought him a measure of calm. He was to have dinner again at Mary Arnold's, and the knowledge that he need not face the officers' mess was a distinct relief. Mary would undoubtedly have heard rumors, but he felt that he could count upon their old friendship, and he was right.

"Good heavens, Larry, what have I been hearing?" she cried when she opened the door to his knock. "No, no, Rachel, I'll let Lieutenant St. Clair in. Come, Larry, and let me give you a glass of brandy. If what the ladies have been whispering all day has any foundation, or is being repeated by their menfolks, you must need one!"

He sighed and allowed himself to be led to the drawing room, where she seated him in a large wing chair and fussed about, pouring a glass of brandy, bringing him cigars and a tray. Phebe Tanner came in in the midst of her maternal bustle and shyly wished him good evening.

"How is Jen tonight?" he asked, rousing himself with an effort from his own troubles.

"Thank thee, he is fine. We sent him off to bed early, poor thing, for he hasn't the strength yet to live up to his inclinations."

He nodded absently and sighed. Phebe was puzzled. Last night, when he'd returned from his interview with the general, he'd talked very little, saying only that he was tired, that he'd been called down. Today, she'd seen that Mrs. Arnold was troubled, and quite obviously about something which concerned him. Her dismay had become apparent after the visit of several ladies, on whose

appearance Phebe had discreetly withdrawn to her room. When they had left, the older woman had sought her out, but only to sit silently, knitting her brows and chewing upon her thumb. She finally vouchsafed that St. Clair was in some sort of trouble with the general, which Phebe, of course, had already guessed. Now she took a seat across the room and watched, bemused, Mrs. Arnold's ministrations.

"Now, then, Larry, what is this all about?"

"Just that I wasn't much of a success, Mary. I didn't think I was particularly brilliant out there, but I hadn't any idea I was going to be considered a total failure . . . or worse."

"Was your summer so awful then?"

He stirred. "No, it wasn't awful. It wasn't even very hard. It's just that I . . . well, I didn't turn out to be much of an officer."

Phebe stared at him in concern. This was a stranger to the gay and charming young officer of the trip into the fort. He looked ten years older, and his face was weary, his voice listless. A fleeting memory of the scene at Sentinel Hill came back to her and she wondered suddenly if his conscience now suffered. Surely something had disturbed him to change him so!

To Mary Arnold, too, who had known him for many years, his apathy was a shock, and though she shrank from the need to be confidante and comforter, she also realized that in a way this was her opportunity. So she would gird herself for duty, no matter how unpleasant and how wearying. Men! she thought, amused. So strong and self-reliant! Even such a man as her husband, stubborn, wilful, decisive to a fault, had had his times of complete dependence, becoming, momentarily, putty in her hands. It never lasted very long, and the advantages gained were never enduring. Still, she would have the pleasure and intoxication of temporary power.

Aloud, she exclaimed, "Oh, come now, Larry, you don't mean that, you know. Oh, you're no swashbuckler, like Harry, but what does that signify? Tell me . . . tell us what happened. I've heard only the insinuations, which I don't for a minute believe, and I'm dying of curiosity to know what actually occurred!"

"I don't know what you may have heard, Mary," he replied slowly, frowning a little, "but it all boils down to the fact that I made an unholy mess of the one bit of real action we saw all

summer. The general inferred, I think, that others may consider the mistake that I made the decision and action of a coward." He paused, holding the brandy toward the firelight, turning it slowly as he told them briefly of the affair. "It wasn't pretty," he concluded, "and I gather it will not be considered a natural error on my part. But if you can believe me, Mary, and you also, Miss Tanner," he turned to the girl, specifically including her for the first time in the conversation, "I thought I was doing the proper thing, the only thing possible under the circumstances."

Phebe was shocked, and that shock was plain upon her face. That's why, she thought, Sergeant Maxwell felt as he did. That's why there was tension between them and why the men acted so . . . so contemptuous toward him. And hadn't he committed a similar error when he'd left the Negro to the border men? Too much caution, perhaps? But a coward? No . . . no, surely not a coward. A gentleman, yes, used to comfort and convenience, and accustomed, too, to thinking things out carefully. But surely not a coward. Yet, even as she denied it, she was uncertain, and she could not help remembering her own comparison between sergeant and officer. There would never be any question about Maxwell. His quiet strength was a constant testimonial to bravery, and the impression he gave was of an unyielding dedication far too strong to admit of timidity or even of fallibility. It was clear that St. Clair had none of these rocklike qualities, and although he was not really soft and yielding, he was . . . what? Too civilized, after all? Still, she thought, he isn't a coward.

Mary Arnold was as much dismayed, but for different reasons. Her dismay, however, did not keep her silent or rob her of assurance. "Oh, the general!" she cried contemptuously. "Mercy, Larry, you must not mind him. He is quite old, and I understand that he was only sent out here as his last assignment before retiring. He's really only marking time, and surely everyone knows it. No one will pay him the least attention back in Washington. No, I should not worry very much, were I you, what he thinks or says. Besides, my dear, he'll never make any report of this nature to Washington. Why, he would not dare! Your father would have his head when he hears of such . . . such lies!"

St. Clair winced.

"In any case," she continued hastily, seeing that wince and the

quick spurt of anger in his eyes, "in any case, I do not see what everyone is talking about. It simply does not make sense! You only did what you thought right at the time and under the circumstances, and you were there and knew the situation, whereas the general could not possibly know, nor could anyone else. How, then, can they say whether your decision was good or bad? The general did not say, did he, that your decision was . . . well . . . cowardly?"

"No, but he implied it."

"You know, Larry, you could fret about this for a hundred years and it would not do you the least bit of good. I myself believe, knowing the general and, really, my dear, he is in his dotage, that he is just finding fault with you to give you a taste of discipline. Older officers are forever scolding their juniors, just to toughen them, if for no other reason. Why, Harry is famous for it! Besides, these First Dragoons are so proud! Their reputation means more to them than common sense dictates. They're like West Point officers that way, and believe me, I know all about them. Often enough, they find it easier to be bold and dashing than to use their heads! The dragoons, I am sure, do not even understand the meaning of the word caution."

In spite of her extravagance, what she said sounded reasonable enough, and he straightened a little in his chair, taking heart. Meanwhile Phebe listened in silence. She knew that there was nothing she could say here, for she was shut out by a lack of knowledge both of the affair and of the conduct expected of an army officer. She could not comprehend exactly how St. Clair had erred, if he had erred, in the matter itself. She thought Mary Arnold very good and kind to speak as she did and thought herself a fool, struck mute as she was, not to be able to add one small word of understanding or encouragement. She could only sit and turn over in her mind what little she knew of this man in relation to what little she knew of his problem, and that served to bewilder her further.

"Scolding or not," St. Clair replied slowly, "I'm in for trouble. It's been lapping at my feet all day."

"Trouble? Not a court-martial?" Mary Arnold cried, paling. She had had enough experience with courts-martial lately to know them as completely unfortunate.

"No. Nothing like that. I didn't break any regulations or an order

or anything as cut and dried as that. No, it's only my judgment, it seems, which is open to question."

"Oh, mercy, how you frightened me! But you can live this down, Larry. These are only rumors, started, I suppose, by your men. Why, we'll have all sorts of parties and dinners, and the officers will soon forget anything the men may have whispered. You know yourself how a whisper can become a shout on these army posts! Especially if you let them ever get started. No, no, we'll scotch this one right away. Now!"

"I don't know," he said softly. "I've never been very good at living things down."

Phebe heard the black mood in his voice and felt a pang of compassion. She was not sure that she thought Mrs. Arnold's approach the proper one. It will do nothing for his pride in himself, she thought, to hide behind a woman's skirts. Oh, I wish there was something that I could do, something that I could say to help! But she could only sit helplessly and listen as Mrs. Arnold chattered on.

"Ah, no, you will be no social outcast, not as long as I am social arbiter of Fort Leavenworth. And I am, you know? I believe it's all due to the magic of the Bishop name, not to mention Papa's money, and then, of course, Harry *has* made quite a name for himself and been . . . well, very successful. He is known all the way to Washington. Papa often writes me that he has been told of Harry's doings by some of his important friends, or has even read some yarn in the paper about him. He says Harry sounds like a Wild West hero, and he's sure he must have dozens of scalps in his belt!"

Again, St. Clair winced, and as hastily as he could, changed the subject with a sidelong glance toward Phebe. "By the way, I believe your husband is my new commander, Mary. I've been transferred from B to K Troop. Signed in over there this morning. Green, the CO, seems a decent chap."

"Why, that's wonderful, Larry! It means you'll be posted here not only for the winter but for next summer, too. We can fête you like the lion of Leavenworth! Harry will help, I'm sure . . ." and she went on to plan aloud.

St. Clair, grateful for her sympathy, hardly heard her. He was thinking of the last day she had been Mary Bishop, and of her farewell to him. She had been full of plans then, too, and had

carried everything before her. The Bishops were neighbors of the St. Clairs, had been neighbors for thirty years or more. They had shared a wide, smooth-running creek and a great boxwood hedge. Literally, he had known her from the day he was born, for he was the younger by four years. They had played together in childhood, and later, in adolescence, he had been in love with her, and her marriage to Arnold, then Captain Arnold, had left him desolate. She had broken the news to him gently one summer evening when he was home from Harvard, and he had tried then to tell her of his own love in a hopeless attempt to change her mind, but embarrassment, despair, awkwardness had tangled his words, and he had ended playing the dumb mute instead, a lovelorn collegiate wallowing in his sorrows. It had taken him several years before he could look back upon himself without disgust.

When he had met her again at this border post last spring, he had welcomed the renewal of their friendship with a mature pleasure, his young agony forgotten. In the intervening years he had learned to value freedom. He had also learned to recognize the subtle chains Mary Arnold held ready for any man. Yet, now, returned from the long, harsh, and discouraging summer campaign and with his ego deeply wounded, he was no longer wary, but suddenly lonely, as men traveling on the plains for months without women are lonely. Sitting in this comfortable room, the dust of the prairie still in his throat, he was doubly grateful for the friendship she offered, and for her help, no matter how unsuitable he might intuitively know it to be. A victim of his own uncertainty, he relaxed and allowed her to do as she would.

For two weeks she had her way unchecked. Major Arnold did not return from Kickapoo, and using Phebe Tanner's presence as her excuse, Mary Arnold began a round of parties and dinners which were soon considered the gayest of the season. In the teeth of the rumors and the whispers she actually lionized St. Clair, making certain that everyone knew who his father was, and providing a flattering background for his good looks and social ease. The ladies were quickly won, and they slowly and relentlessly began to bring their husbands with them, until she had almost carried the day. Almost, but not quite. There was still some question left, some slight suspicion, the kind of doubt which, if left undisturbed, would have remained to lift eyebrows a bit, or be dismissed by such casual

remarks as, "Oh, there was some sort of trouble." By circumstance, Phebe found herself caught up in the social whirl. Never before had she lived so gay a life. She and St. Clair were the center of attention; dinner parties were given in her honor, and Mary Arnold spared no pains to see that she was properly introduced to the fort's leading families, including the general and his wife. In the contagious excitement, the not-too-well-ingrained habits of simplicity slipped away; and while her Quaker faith was strong, it was, temporarily, no match for a young woman's desire to be on terms with a more sophisticated world. She quite frankly enjoyed herself, enjoyed the attentions she received, the small stir she made among the young bachelor lieutenants, the gallantry of the older married officers, the pleasant conversation of their wives. Time slipped away so delightfully that it almost went unnoticed.

As for St. Clair, he allowed himself to be moved this way or that as Mary Arnold wished, without wholly comprehending what it was she was accomplishing. He was still very much wrapped up in himself, still preoccupied with his act and its consequences. He was aware that the whispers and innuendoes were diminishing and that Mary was the agent responsible for their quieting, but, still, he was not at peace. He was not yet objective enough about the whole affair to realize that she was not only calling on her own social prestige, but also on that of *his* family. If he had, he would have been even more disturbed.

Then, with success all but ensured, Major Arnold returned to the fort. He arrived in the midst of one of Mary's gayest parties, and with his appearance she was forced to watch her small and tinsel edifice swiftly crumple.

ELEVEN

It was an unseasonable autumn night and a cold wind bent the grass, forewarning winter. A thin sliver of moon cast a slender light upon the road, offering little help to the dozen horsemen making their way southward over the rolling hills. At their head, Major Arnold rode angrily and alone. The ringing of shod hooves behind him among the frozen ruts was a cold sound, and clods of partly frozen mud littered the road, tripping the unwary horses. Fragile ice, sealing mud-holes and puddles, reflected the waning moon and splintered thinly beneath the hooves. Beyond this, and the creak of leather, the grunt of a stumbling horse, there was no other sound to break the monotonous sigh of wind through grass.

Arnold hunched sullenly in his saddle, pulling his light cape closer around his throat in an effort to keep the wind from his thoroughly chilled body. Who in God's name, he thought, could have predicted a night like this, this early in the fall? Black as hell and cold as a witch's teat! No blankets issued, no overcoats, nothing! No alternative but to keep moving! He felt a sudden yearning for the warmth and comfort of his quarters, an accustomed longing for the security of his own four walls. Almost with

tenderness, he thought of his wife, of their occasional *rapprochement*, the rare meeting of their minds and the far-too-brief moments of affection. Only this ever penetrated the core of his loneliness and kept them still together, or, rather, he supposed, she with him. To almost all else he felt impervious, as though protected by an unbreachable wall. He did not wish to be impervious, he did not want the wall. He had always suffered from loneliness, but he had never learned how to break the barrier between himself and others, not even those he loved.

Now, thinking of Mary, he was soothed, but only momentarily, for he could not think of her long without remembering her frequent glances of revulsion, the cutting words which held no love. He shivered, resolutely turning his thoughts away from her, too aware of his own vulnerability. Anger was safer, and so he rekindled fury as a protection against loneliness and weakness. There was comfort, after all, to be found in the memory of the one deserter he'd been able to catch and shoot. If the fools at his back had only been quicker, he'd have had the same pleasure with the other two, but they'd gotten clean away, damn them, and with their carbines and government horses, which, he thought contemptuously, the general will complain about for the next six weeks! The general, ugh! He leaned sideways in the saddle and spat, heedless that the wind might carry it back into the face of the man riding behind. All that could be said for the general was that he was at least preferable to the colonel, and at the very thought of the latter his mood turned blacker. The colonel had almost lost him his commission over the affair of a passel of filthy Indian squaws and papooses, and he, Arnold, had not then, nor could now, understand it. Why all that shouting over a handful of savages? What had possessed the man to make such an issue of it if not professional jealousy? It was the only reasonable conclusion he'd been able to draw. If, he thought bitterly, I could only have called him out, and ended the matter with a bullet through his heart. The man was soft, or witless, and obviously intended to ruin me! Intends, he added.

Mingled with the chill discomfort of his body and the turmoil of his anger, the internal distress of bad whisky in his guts was almost unbearable. Indigestion made foul cotton of his mouth; his tongue lay sour and heavy, like the weight of his rage upon

his brain. He wanted to free himself of his fury as he wanted to cleanse his body, but once anger gained ascendancy he was helpless. Even if he could have maintained control, he was too much in dread of the black despair which he knew from long experience would take its place.

So he rode on, making an effort to maintain self-control, but gradually submerged by seething fury as he now seized upon the colonel's shocked denunciation of him last spring, then switched to the small tribe of Sioux who had got in his way, and finally settled upon the two deserters who had used an old and well-tried trick to elude him, sending a boy to drive off loose horses through the brush while they rode off in the opposite direction. It had worked well enough with his stupid dragoons. They had taken off pell-mell after the running horses, and if it hadn't been for the fact that he and two of his men had remained at the cabin trying to get information from the woman there, all three would have escaped. Fortunately, he had caught a glimpse of them and the pursuit had been all that he could have wished for; if he could only have caught all three! As it was, the third and last rider had gone beneath a tree where a low limb swept him from the saddle, leaving him writhing and gasping for air, the wind knocked from his belly.

Yes, Arnold thought, shifting his holstered pistol farther back on his thigh, that part of it had been a pleasure, and he could savor the image of the man's shocked face, open mouth still reaching for air as he had pulled the trigger.

The frozen road rose and fell over the odd, steep hills that ran in broken ridges away from the Missouri, to flatten eventually into prairie to the west. Frost rimed the grass at the edges, helping the weary horses a little. An owl hooted in a small stand of trees and he shivered, again tugging at his thin cape, damning with renewed curses the sudden change in weather. His fury was swelling slowly, pushing hard through his veins.

Temper was his greatest handicap and he knew it well. All his life, from the time as a boy when he'd first realized that it could bring him only disfavor and dislike, he had struggled to control it. It was not that dislike in itself bothered him; it was simply that when people disliked him they often managed to raise barriers in the way of his ambition, and ambition, like temper, rode him hard. Slender, dapper, always conscious of his small stature, a meager five-

foot-seven, he had graduated number two man in his class at West Point. In fifteen years of service since, most of it spent, by his own choice, on the border, he had made a name for himself as a shrewd and courageous Indian fighter. From the first day when he had reported into Fort Scott, a raw second lieutenant fresh from the Hudson, he had worked hard at building that reputation. Absolutely fearless, dedicated and obstinate, he had inspired respect, dread, and awe, but no affection. This, he would have said with a laugh, is the way it should be. An officer must be respected, he should be held in awe, and above all, he should be dreaded. It was a good sign when an officer was hated, because hate stems from fear, and only when an officer is feared is he effective.

For almost fifteen years he had been successful in his trade, either because his evaluation of his role had proved correct, or because he was lucky. His superiors had found him immensely useful, although few liked or trusted him as a person. He was an asset to any command, and he was handed the most difficult of assignments. It did not matter that his subordinates complained, albeit discreetly, for they feared the small, dark major—and with reason. It did not matter that he was liberal with courts-martial, quarters-arrests, and forfeitures of pay and allowances. Nothing mattered so long as he did the job required and kept his men in line, and this he had done, until the preceding spring.

In pressing charges against a young officer for refusing to obey a direct order Arnold had tied a rope around his own neck, and, ironically, in the court-martial he had insisted upon for Lieutenant Bird, the mistake of his career came to light. Witnesses gave their accounts of the slaughter of Indian women and children trying to escape the crossfire so skillfully set up across the village at the major's command. Several eyewitnesses confirmed the shooting of thirty surrendered Indian women and old men at Arnold's order, and quoted him as saying that the dragoons "could not be bothered dragging prisoners into Laramie." The colonel, then in command at Leavenworth, had been so thoroughly appalled that he had pressed at once for a court-martial for Arnold, but pressure was brought to bear from higher circles all the way back to Washington, and in the end he had to be satisfied with a reprimand for the major and an exoneration of the still-frightened Bird. On his own responsibility he had confined Arnold to duties on or about the fort,

a stiffer punishment than it seemed, since it weighed on the spirit of the man more heavily even than the reprimand. However, in due time the colonel was replaced as commander of Fort Leavenworth, and the confines of the major's duties gradually relaxed, so that he now rode far and wide on missions of various kinds. No one had yet suggested, however, that he be sent West again.

Another hour, Arnold thought as he rode, glancing bitterly at the stars. He moved restlessly in the saddle, putting spur to the flanks of his mare. Spurs were a fetish with him; he tended them as other men might tend their mustaches or their guns or their clothes. He imparted a tremendous value to their sharpness, knowing that at their razor touch his mare would break from a standstill into a dead gallop, and that once she was stretched and moving, no Indian pony could get near her. So he sharpened, polished, cleaned off the blood, not wholly aware that over and above the margin of safety his care provided, he quite simply found pleasure in the convulsive leap of a horse when spurred.

Now he found a savage enjoyment in alternately spurring the mare forward and checking her with the heavy Spanish bit he liked to use, a cruel thing of twisted wire which closed over and bit deeply into the tongue at the pull of a checking rein. The mare's tired body humped beneath the saddle, her neck strained as he bent her head to the bit, and he laughed aloud . . . In a series of gathered leaps she moved down the road, stumbled, and almost fell. He cursed joyously and beat her hindquarters with the braided quirt he wore attached to his wrist.

He was an excellent horseman, one of the best at the fort, yet, at the same time, he was the curse of the quartermaster, being the greatest single source of lamed and foundered horses in the First Dragoons. It was the colonel, also, who had once called him down after witnessing him give brutal vent to his anger on a fine sorrel gelding, and it was the colonel who had outlawed the Spanish bit, something the general had not yet noticed.

By God, Arnold thought, caught up again by the image of the man who had almost brought him down, the damn Abolitionist-coddler! If it hadn't been for Colonel Sumner's liver-hearted backing and filling, he, Arnold, could have settled this Lawrence business once and for all! He'd have ordered the dragoons in on

those nigger-lovers with their Beecher Bibles and that damned cant about slavery being unholy, and he'd have burnt 'em out! Burnt the damn town to the ground, by God! Every last stick of it! Orders or no orders, every damn nigger he saw loose on the hoof was going back to Missouri and slavery just as fast as he could get him there! And no amount of free-papers was going to make one damn bit of difference! Those Missouri men ought to pay me, he thought with a grim smile, mentally counting the number of freed Negroes he'd already rounded up and sent back across the Missouri and into slavery again.

By the time the detachment reached the fort an hour later, he had simmered and stewed until his mood was wicked. He dismissed his men, turned his horse over to his orderly, and stalked off in the direction of his quarters. As he mounted the steps to the veranda, he heard the sound of voices and laughter, the clink of glasses. A slow, hot tide of blood mounted his throat and cheeks. Cursing beneath his breath, he yanked off his dusty cap and smoothed his hair and dark mustache. A party! On this night of all nights.

Weary to the bone, cold and half sick, all he wanted was the warmth of his wife's body and a moment, one small moment of sympathy. He knew that now she would be over-exhilarated and tired, that she would not have either the insight or the desire to heed his longing, nor any need herself. Yet, paradoxically, his anger waned a little, for he was afraid of her, afraid of her quick and witty tongue which could sometimes strip him of all pretension and set him naked before his own inward eye. He hated to chance her dark eyes turned on him with such unfathomable scorn that it never failed to shake his own tough ego. Strangely enough, friends who years before at their marriage had pronounced them a perfectly matched pair, both small and dark and slender, both quick of wit and temper, had not known the truth of their prophecy. They had been thinking only in terms of externals; the Arnolds, themselves, soon found that their similarities went deeper.

Shaking himself lightly, swallowing both anger and weariness, Arnold let himself in at the front door and slowly made his way across the hall, the light dazzling his eyes. His first impression was of a mass of chatting, laughing strangers milling about the parlor, but gradually the figures sorted themselves out into the familiar

faces and figures of his brother officers and their wives, and he saw at a glance that most of the fort's higher rank was there. Ah, he thought with the scorn of a man with no family, the magic of my wife's connections!

"Oh, there you are, Harry!" Mary had seen him, and detaching herself from an animated group, came up, smiling. The smile, he saw at once, was forced. A feeling of terrible hopelessness overrode rage momentarily, yet for the sake of his yearning he tried. He offered his arm and advanced into the room, smiling his greeting, bowing slightly to the ladies, apologizing for his travel-worn appearance, making brief jokes on the state of Kickapoo. In a daze he moved through the room, hardly noticing to whom he spoke or what he said or was said to him. Transient awareness returned only when Mary halted him before a tall young lieutenant and he heard her voice, noticeably gay.

"Harry, you surely remember Larry St. Clair, don't you? The St. Clairs were our famous neighbors in Maryland! I believe you and Larry met briefly once, the day of our wedding. Of course, that's long ago—or seems so. Larry's our guest of honor tonight, and the beau of all the ladies here!"

He looked up into the younger man's face, hearing the light affection in her tone, seeing from the corner of his eye the small hand she placed upon this other's arm, seeing and hearing the tenderness he craved directed here. With actual pain he noticed the man's height, the broad shoulders and good set of his dark head, noting, even, the faintly puzzled light in the gray eyes regarding him in turn. Famous neighbors? Yes, of course, the sullen young fop at the Bishop reception, and the older St. Clair, the famous father who pulled the golden strings. Mary had said lightly, "And Larry, poor boy, wants to marry me, too, Harry, so do be careful, darling, that he doesn't cut out your heart!" Now her old beau was out here, a good ten years younger than he—and handsome. Hell, too damned handsome! Was she to dangle another before him just to watch him squirm? Was he to endure again the torture of jealousy that she might be amused?

He was so shaken that he could not trust himself to speak. Instead, in an involuntary gesture, he took a backward step, swinging away from them, and his elbow caught Rachel, the mulatto slave, as

she passed with a heavily loaded tray of glasses. Punch sloshed and splashed, the tray tilted and fell as the girl snatched at it frantically, trying to right it. Glass shattered upon the floor, and in the awesome echo of its crash, a dull red mounting his cheek, and with every eye in the room turned his way, Arnold walked out.

TWELVE

He waited out the party in his room, the door locked against Mary's stored anger. He waited, drinking slowly and fulsomely from a bottle of good whisky, and indulged himself with plans for retaliation. He would not sit by this time, watching yet pretending not to watch, caring and acting as if he did not give a damn. No, this time he'd find a way to hurt her as she had hurt him. He waited until the voices drifted away at last and the murmurs through the house grew still. He waited until she came to rattle his door knob, whispering angrily at the crack, and then went away, defeated. Smiling, he rose and yawned, stretching a bit and scratching himself as he shed saber and belt, hanging them on the post of his bed. Then he unlocked his door and moved out into the dark hall, pausing a moment outside his wife's door, his anger held in abeyance, the set tension of his face slackening a little. In a dim corner of his turgid brain he found an image of her, small and pretty in sleep, the sharp line of her mouth softened by dreams, and for an instant a tiny flame of tenderness flared beneath the curtain of his sullen rage. And was gone.

Shaking himself lightly, he turned like a cat and groped his way

down the dark hallway, passing down the two steps at the rear of the house which led to the servants' quarters situated above kitchen and entry. He ran his fingers along the left wall until he found a door. Noiselessly he opened it, stepped inside, and quietly closed the door at his back. He crouched and began exploring with his fingers until they touched the pallet of straw and blankets, then he paused on hands and knees to listen. He could hear the mulatto girl's even breathing in the darkness and he smiled, the agonizing weight of his anger abating before anticipation. He moved again, touched blankets, warm flesh, and his fingers closed hard.

The girl woke with a faint cry and struggled to rise.

"Shhhh!" he hissed, catching her roughly by the shoulder, pushing her down. "Don't make a sound or, by God, I'll skin you alive!" He let the raw ends of his fury slip away in the wild desire beating in his throat, and his grip tightened.

Rachel, however, had had one such visit from her master before, and she would just as soon be skinned alive as endure another. She opened her mouth and screamed, the piercing shriek echoing and re-echoing through the small room, all but deafening him. The thin door was no barrier, and the narrow hall proved an excellent sounding board.

The sound brought Phebe Tanner from a bleak nightmare in which she was desperately trying to care for an endless, faceless row of people ill with cholera, while from somewhere Jen kept calling to her for help. She leapt from the big four-poster bed and stumbled wildly about the furniture, thinking that it was he who had screamed. Frantically she sought the candle she had extinguished not an hour before, and her shaking hands were still fumbling about the washstand when the door opened and Mary Arnold stood upon the threshold.

"Did you cry out, Miss Tanner?" she asked hoarsely, her face white in the weak light of the candle she held high in one hand.

Down the hall, Jen was calling, "Pheb! Pheb, is thee all right?"

"Oh, Mrs. Arnold, what was that?" Phebe cried, frightened, pushing almost rudely past in her eagerness to reach Jen. "It wasn't thee, Jen?" she asked as he joined them.

He shook his head, staring beyond the small circle of candlelight with wide eyes.

"Mercy, then, what was it!" Mrs. Arnold exclaimed, the candle

trembling in her hand and spilling hot wax down the sides of the holder. "What a terrible cry!"

She raised the light farther, staring down the hall, and saw the open door of her husband's room. Her frightened expression changed instantly, color flooded her cheeks, her mouth set. Forgetting her guests, she whirled and started down the hall toward the back of the house, leaving the two young Tanners in darkness and bewilderment.

In the tiny room, Arnold shifted his grip from the slave girl's shoulder to her throat and was all but throttling her in rage. When Mary Arnold flung open the door she saw the girl's starting eyes, then his fingers digging into the light-brown flesh.

"Henry!"

He jumped convulsively, his grip relaxing. The mulatto girl shrank away, moaning and whimpering, rubbing her injured throat, her terrified eyes white-rimmed in the flickering light.

"Henry!" Mary Arnold hissed, her disgust and revulsion whispering into the room like an aroused and deadly snake.

He rose slowly to his feet, wiping the sweat from his face with the back of his hand. Sweat was flowing from every pore of his body and his face was pale and strange. "It's none of your concern," he said icily, not looking at her. "You needn't pretend that you give a damn."

"We can speak of that later," she returned as coldly, hating to look at him. "We have guests and that is my concern. Also, Rachel is my property, not yours. If you'll please to keep quiet, perhaps I can explain this whole ridiculous business," and she turned quickly from the room, closing the door. She returned to where the puzzled Tanners waited in darkness, clutching each other's hands. "It's quite all right," she called out. "Rachel just had a nightmare. The poor girl woke up terrified. Please go back to bed. It's unfortunate that she had to scream so and frighten us all. I'm very sorry. But you know how scarey these niggers are!"

"Could I help, Mrs. Arnold? Does she need someone to sit with her a bit?" Phebe asked timidly.

"Mercy, no!" Mrs. Arnold replied rather shortly. "No, no. It doesn't mean anything. Niggers let themselves go like this sometimes! They're just like children. No, please just return to your beds

and have a good sleep. I'll hold the candle high so that you can find your way, then I shall go back and quiet her properly. . . ."

When she had the Tanners settled again, she hurried back to the little room, afraid of what her husband might do. She found him still by the door in the darkness, while the girl cowered against the wall. Oh dear, she thought angrily, he's in one of his insane rages. She thanked her stars that she had had the foresight to lock her own door.

"Come along, Harry, that's quite enough of this ridiculous scene! Come on to your room before those two come popping out again. Not that I blame them. That scream was enough to curdle the blood of an . . . an Indian! How can you be such a silly girl, Rachel?" she demanded crossly of the frightened mulatto.

"She's to be whipped, you understand?" Arnold muttered, beside himself with rage.

"Oh, come now . . . ah, Harry, you're drunk!" The rank, stale odor of whisky hit her suddenly and she drew back.

"Whipped till she bleeds, you hear?"

"Please, please, Missus Arnold . . ."

"Well, you little fool, you needn't have shrieked so! Mercy, you scared me nearly to death, and there's no telling what sort of fine scandal all this would have made if they'd seen what was going on here!"

"Till she bleeds!"

"Oh, for God's sake! Come out of here, Harry! You're behaving like a fool! What on earth has gotten into you lately? You're becoming positively imbecilic! Well, you are. And if you're not careful, everyone will know it, and then what? Now, come on to bed before you wake those poor children again."

She caught him by the arm and all but dragged him from the room. In his bedroom, she pushed him down onto the bed and fixed him a whisky toddy, waiting while he drank it, sitting disheveled and unsightly on the edge of the bed.

She stared down at him coldly. "I honestly do not see how you can be so stupid, Harry. If the Tanners had discovered what you were up to, imagine the stories that would be around the fort by tomorrow night!"

"I want her whipped," he mumbled.

"Is your reputation so secure these days," she continued, ignoring

him, "that you can afford that kind of gossip? Do you think you can knock over a tray of punch and then stalk from the room without a word or an apology to anyone and not have it talked about? Or do you think to hurt me by bringing a scandal of this sort on my head? Please do not try, for I shall only return to Maryland and live you down, which would not be to my sorrow."

"Whipped till she bleeds, God damn her!"

"Oh, mercy!" She threw a blanket over him and stood back, surveying him coldly. He caught the tail of that look as he lowered his face to his hands, clutching his aching head. Anger had left him now. He was drained and empty and desolate, the thing he most feared. There was a long moment of silence, and then he heard her sigh, and begin again, her voice toneless with patience and something very akin to dislike.

"For years you and I have not got on very well, Harry, and there's little use pretending any longer that we have. For years I've known exactly what sort of man you are, but the one thing I did give you credit for was intelligence. If you're to begin behaving like an ass . . ."

She stopped, staring down at him. He had fallen back upon the bed, pulling the cover to his chin. His eyes were shut, his pallid face relaxed, and as she stood there he began to snore. Ah, my God, she thought bitterly, watching his loosening face, the sodden fool! Poor Rachel. I suppose she will have to be whipped or I shall never hear the last of it. He'll make twice the scene and do something rash. How can a man be so formidable, and yet such a fool!

Disturbed, she stepped out upon the second-floor veranda and stood a moment in the darkness, hearing her husband's heavy breathing in the room at her back. Moonlight drenched the parade ground, casting great black shadows beneath the trees undulating gently whenever the wind stirred through their boughs and shivered across the leaves piled at the foot of their sprawling trunks. An owl hooted nearby and the lonely sound made her shiver, not from the cold. Morbid thoughts assailed her. I am growing old. I will soon be thirty, someday forty, and then I will count the wrinkles upon my face and the years until my grave. In all this time what shall I have done? Abide by Harry? Abide, abide, suffer him until I die? Is that to be my fate? This between now and death? How strange that nothing has turned out the way I expected. How strange that I

should have been so misled, or so misled myself. For to herself, Mary Arnold was honest, and upon herself, her glance was clear. Oh, no, she thought with a pang, I cannot grow old. Not yet. Nor can I leave Harry. My mistake was made too long ago, and too much is now at stake. I *can* bear him. I must and I will!

Lights shone from the many windows of the dragoon barracks up the quarters row and men's voices called back and forth. Laughter burst from the shadows somewhere, doors banged, boots thudded, sabers rattled. The dark figure of a sentry walking his post before the underground magazine moved, like a tired ghost, in and out of the light and shadow, while moonlight touched the metal of his carbine at his shoulder with tiny scratches of flame, and polished the brass cannon in their still row beyond him. Out on the road along the bluff, hooves rang on packed earth, and somewhere close by, a baby wailed.

Ah, Mary Arnold thought, relaxing, at least I have been spared that! She smiled to herself in the darkness and turned back into the house. *One thing is certain*; with Larry back, I will no longer be bored.

The next morning, the mulatto girl was brought out stripped to the waist, tied to one of the spotless polished brass cannon on the parade ground in front of the Arnold quarters, and lashed soundly with a rope-end by one of the major's noncommissioned officers.

THIRTEEN

The laughter and shouting of the men gathered on the Main Parade below her window woke Phebe, but it was many minutes before she understood what she heard. Instead, she lay savoring the comfort of white sheets and feather mattress as she had every day during the last two weeks. Sunlight flooded the cheerful room, making a rainbow of color of the patchwork quilt at her feet, and leaving golden squares of light on unlikely places—the bottom of the door, a bit of the wall, the cane bottom of a chair, the precise center of her bed. She lay enjoying her own contentment until she noticed that the noise outside had coarsened. After a moment, listening now, she rose and pulled the white lace curtains discreetly to one side.

At first she saw nothing more than a crowd of soldiers gathered near a row of cannon beneath the trees, but even as she watched in bewilderment, the crowd began to break up, the men mill about, some following several of their number who were escorting someone in the direction of the Arnold quarters. It wasn't until they crossed the dusty road that the girl saw who that person was.

"Oh!" she gasped, shocked to the core.

She let the curtain fall back into place and stood unmoving beside the window for many minutes, trying to understand what she had just seen. Why would they whip Rachel? And like that? Was she a slave then? Oh, mercy, that was it! Rachel was a slave. Not a servant, but a slave. Owned body and soul by the Arnolds, and forced, these last weeks, to wait upon herself and Jen! Phebe was stricken. But what else? she asked herself numbly. What could she have done to deserve to be punished so? I cannot believe that Mrs. Arnold would ever permit such a thing!

In distress, she gathered together the events of the night before, seeking an answer. Rachel had screamed. A nightmare, Mrs. Arnold had said, yet she had seemed quite vexed. But good heavens, surely one did not whip a slave, and in this terrible fashion, for such a thing!

Her cheeks grew hot, anger gradually replacing shock, and she began to move restlessly about the room. "How could she? How *could* she?" she whispered aloud. She had grown quite fond of Mary Arnold, affection and admiration mingling with the gratitude she felt toward the older woman, and her dismay was partly on this account and partly because she had been so blind. The thought occurred to her that Rachel might even have been whipped on her account—hers and Jen's—whipped for disturbing the Arnolds' guests with her frightened cries. "Oh, no!" she said aloud, horrified. "Surely they would not do that! How could she allow it?"

She walked back to the window and pulled the curtains aside to gaze a moment on the now empty parade ground. No, she thought numbly, she is too good and kind. Yet, she remembered someone once saying to her uncle that slaves were mistreated because their masters did not think of them as human, and that in the refusal to accept their humanity lay the most vicious evil of the whole system. For, the man had gone on to say, as her uncle had nodded in agreement, if you can deny humanity to a man, then you can deny him the right of life, and the next step is easy. As you can order or take the life of a beast without undue strain to your conscience, so you can order as you please, or even take the life of, a slave. As for the slave himself, it was not so much the mistreatment, bad as that might be, that was so dreadful, but this indignity to body and soul. Men did such things to dogs, to oxen, to other animals, but not to other men!

And I, she thought guiltily, could I not have seen that they denied Rachel humanity? Could I not have understood when they constantly called her "nigger" and were not in the least concerned that she should wake screaming in the night, frightened by a dream?

She had known little about the matter of slavery, though she had heard, of course, discussions among the Quakers, and several times in Meeting one Friend or another had risen to air his troubled views on the subject. She had heard of the Underground Railroad, and rumors that certain friends of her uncle were active in its operation. The newspapers of the East had been full of accounts of cruelty and wanton brutality in the South, but her uncle had been inclined to consider them exaggerated. In part, her present shock and confusion arose from just exactly this kind of information. She had expected the brutal slaveholder, the man with a whip who sold children away from their mothers, husbands away from their wives. But this was something entirely different, this was a side for which she was totally unprepared; these were pleasant, kind, intelligent people, these . . . were friends!

"I don't understand!" she exclaimed aloud and repeated, "How could she allow it?"

Confused and indignant, she turned away from the window and began hurriedly to dress, but at the door she hesitated again. What shall I do? she wondered. We cannot stay here any longer. Jen and I cannot stay where slaves are kept. We cannot be a party to slavery in any way. But where can we go? What can we do? Guiltily, she knew this was the question she'd been avoiding, the decision she'd postponed in favor of pleasure. Her own irresponsibility shamed her. She'd not even given thought to the future. Her excuse had been Jen's weakness, but she had to admit that Jen had given the lie to that excuse well over a week ago. Not only that, but she had become aware that her brother was not as happy in his stay as she; he was growing restless and bored. And while she'd put this down at first to the natural result of convalescence, now she was not so sure. Jen had taken to border ways with a speed which had alarmed her, though she'd supposed it natural enough for a growing boy to be interested in guns and horses and the rough ways and speech of hardy men, and she'd been pleased enough to watch his self-reliance emerge, knowing that she would not have to carry their

troubles alone. Still, she wished that he had not grown so impatient in the formality of the Arnolds' home.

Only the afternoon before he'd exclaimed impatiently, "I don't see what thee likes so here, Pheb! Thee is always in a flutter and la-de-dahing all about when the lieutenant comes and all that talk, talk, talk! Oh, how I wish we'd gone with Sergeant Maxwell that day! He said that he would teach me . . . well, lots of things."

"Things? Indian ways? How to trap and skin animals, I suppose, and such as that?" she'd replied sharply.

"Well," Jen had retorted defensively, "at least he doesn't spend all his time hanging around women."

Poor Jen. It had undoubtedly been trying for him, and strangely enough, perhaps he was right; neither he nor she belonged here.

She sighed and opened the door, starting down the stairs reluctantly, convinced that they must leave at once, but distressed that she might appear ungrateful, with no proper excuse for such an abrupt departure. Her irresolution was increased when she came upon her hostess in a bright corner of the dining room, enjoying coffee and rolls and appearing wholly unperturbed.

"Ah, good morning, Phebe, my dear. I trust that you had a good sleep after all. Oh, here comes Harry just behind you!"

The girl turned to find the small, dark major she had met the night before at her elbow. He gave a slight bow, clicking his heels, the brightly polished spurs jingling musically. His thin face was pale, and he looked, she thought, quite ill. As he held out a chair for her he stared at her vacantly, as if he'd never seen her before.

"You do remember meeting Miss Tanner last night, don't you, Harry?" Mrs. Arnold asked maliciously.

He smiled, bowing again, his small, dark mustache twitching above his upper lip. "I must apologize, Miss Tanner. I would hate to admit that I'd forgotten meeting a pretty girl."

Rachel came quietly into the room at that moment, carrying a silver tray with coffee service and cups. She moved about in her usual noiseless way, pouring coffee at each place, and the only thing which held meaning for Phebe after the scene she had witnessed through her open window was the trembling of the mulatto girl's hands. She felt suddenly as if she had awakened in a strange world. The bright sun, the cheerful house, the English-china cup with its gay pattern, Mrs. Arnold's lively face, the major's rather

fierce dark stare, all seemed unreal and frightening; the only bit of reality lay in those shaking hands, in the soft clink of china upon china as the mulatto poured hot coffee at her side.

I've been so glad for Jen's sake, she thought, that I've been blind. I have been happy, and in my own enjoyment have not even seen the evil here. Uneasily she remembered a time, not many years ago, when her uncle had taken Jen and herself to a fair, and she, hearing music, had drifted away to stand enthralled before a pavilion where men and girls little older than herself danced and laughed. Her uncle had found her, and led her quietly away. "Thee must always remember," he had remonstrated gravely, "that that which is no longer simple and open can lead thee from God. Thee must also know, my dear, that men commit terrible sins without lifting a finger. The sin of omission can be as much Satan's work as the sin of commission." But she could remember vividly her own delight in the sound of music and laughter, and her own longing to join that gay dance. I am weak, she acknowledged, and I do love pleasure far too well, but now that I have found the evil here I must leave at once, no matter what it costs me in shame. No matter even that we have nowhere to go!

Jen appeared in the doorway, distracting her new determination, and as Mrs. Arnold greeted him gaily, drawing him in with her friendly "Good morning, Jen," she was struck anew with uncertainty. Ah, but I cannot appear ungrateful. Better to give no reason for going other than that I have found something for Jen and me to do, somewhere for us to go, than to risk offending her.

Absently, she returned Jen's greeting, aware of her responsibility for him, aware of her isolation. The vast spaces of the border seemed to swallow her with loneliness, and she felt there was no niche, no place of safety, for them here. Yet to return to Philadelphia seemed equally impossible.

"Pheb? Is that what you call your sister?" she heard Major Arnold ask in an amused voice.

"She likes that best. She says Pheb doesn't sound so much like a bird. Anyway, she thinks Phebe sounds goody-goody and sweet, and she says . . ."

"Jen, hush!"

"Well, that's so! Thee has said it dozens of times!"

Major Arnold laughed. "Then you can't be such a prim Quaker

miss. I mean," he added hastily, seeing her frown, "not too much so."

"Why, you can see very plainly, Harry, that Miss Tanner is no gray little Quaker," Mary Arnold put in lightly. Phebe's wince and blush went unnoticed as she continued, "By the way, did you know that Captain Anscomb's nigger ran off last week?"

The major put his cup down and wiped his mustache carefully. "Anscomb's a fool! He never did lock up that buck properly."

"They're very upset. I do believe from the way Mrs. Anscomb's carrying on that he must have been expensive. She's very sure that someone here at the fort or in town helped him run away."

Arnold snorted. "No doubt. When a nigger crosses the Missouri he as good as thinks he's free. If they'd just hang a few of these insane Abolitionists, along with the runaways, they'd soon put a stop to this kind of thing."

"Thee means that a man could be put to death for helping a Negro escape?" Phebe asked, too astonished to heed the major's angry shrug and momentarily forgetting her own problems.

Arnold smiled. "Of course. It's no better than horse-stealing, you know, and many a horse-thief has danced upon air. A slave is valuable property, which is a side of the matter the Abolitionists never see, or care to see. Why, Rachel there cost me fifteen hundred dollars. A gift to my bride," he added, with a mocking glance for his wife. "So how do you think I'd feel if someone helped her run off to Canada?"

"But death! I . . . I can't believe they could be that harsh. That is . . . too much."

"Too much? No, no, my dear lady, it's not enough. Not nearly enough. A nigger-thief is no better than a horse-thief; worse, in a way, because he's not only stealing but is inciting the black man to mutiny. Hang them, by all means, and quickly!"

"Now, Harry . . ." Mrs. Arnold warned.

"Thee and I do not use the same words, Major Arnold, for thee speaks of property where I speak of humanity, and they are not the same, I am sure. They cannot be the same." Phebe was angry, and almost relieved to center it upon this man, thus bypassing her hostess.

Arnold laughed. "You Quakers are born do-gooders, Miss Tanner, and do-gooders think nothing of advocating causes which affect

everyone but themselves. They are always the first to take away property and things of value from other people, but the last to allow their own to be taken. Abolitionists haven't slaves to set free, so they busy themselves trying to take slaves from those who do own them." He paused, smiling thinly, then added, "It's as simple as that. Like the beggar in the street who demands that the wealth be shared—he holds out his hands and lets everyone else fill them. No, the Missouri Code is fair enough and it's a good thing for Kansas that it was adopted here. What is it, Rachel? Can't you see I'm talking?" He turned irritably to the mulatto girl who was waiting patiently behind him.

"A gentleman is at the door, sir," she said.

"Gentleman? At this hour of the morning? What kind of a gentleman?"

"A soldier, sir. A sergeant."

"A sergeant! Tell him to wait."

"Yes, sir." She slipped noiselessly away but was back within a minute, returning before the major had recollected his thoughts and launched himself again. "He says he wishes to speak to Miss Tanner, sir."

"What!" The major all but exploded. He flung down his napkin and started to rise when Phebe forestalled him.

"That must be Sergeant Maxwell," she cried, catching Jen's sudden glad glance. "If thee would be so kind as to excuse me, Mrs. Arnold, I would like to speak to him." She rose as she spoke and moved almost eagerly toward the door. . . .

"Just a minute, Miss Tanner. I'll go with you." Major Arnold jumped to his feet, a hard, ugly expression on his face.

"Please, do not trouble thyself," she cried in distress. "I . . . he . . ."

"No trouble," he replied shortly. "I merely wish to speak to this soldier who presumes to come calling on my guests!" And he bowed, waiting for her to precede him from the room.

Angry, and not a little apprehensive for Maxwell's sake, if it were he, and she was certain that it was, she hurried past him and through the door.

FOURTEEN

Philip Maxwell had waited patiently, and uneasily, on the parade ground before the Arnold quarters. He had come, he knew, too early, and only his stubborn nature had kept him there, for he was positive that his reception would be cool. Yet he had not only come, but come prepared, on the chance that what he had to say and to offer would be of help. He had borrowed an old horse and light wagon from a married friend, had placed a folded blanket upon the springless seat, and set a parasol upon the floorboards, in a forlorn attempt to make this sad vehicle comfortable; he had polished the badly-pieced harness and curried the gaunt horse, well aware of the sorry contrast he offered to the major's rockaway and spanking team of blacks.

Still, he stood patiently in the strengthening morning sun, boots apart, hands clasped behind his back, half lost in impossible dreams, half aware of his surroundings. An occasional acquaintance passed and called out to him. A group of troopmates came by, and having observed him on the slow march in from the West, they grinned and jeered. His face darkened visibly and they moved hastily on, leaving him to wipe the sweat from his forehead and to flex his

muscles. No time to get in a fight now, he told himself doggedly, but God damn their stinking souls!

The bringing together in the same thought of Phebe Tanner and his companions in the troop made him slightly ill. The one seemed the embodiment of cleanness and youth, of freshness and . . . well, he wasn't sure, but maybe he meant hope, while the other was the smell of unwashed human flesh, of lice and fleas and sweat and manure and brown tobacco juice. If he had had to put it in words, he would have simplified it more or less down to this. Maxwell was no poet, there was little poetry in his soul, but there was longing now as there never had been before.

Time, maybe, he thought, to try 'em. With a reluctant but sturdy tread he crossed the lane and mounted the steps to the veranda, where he paused, took a deep breath, and knocked sharply on the door, ignoring the polished brass eagle entirely. Surely the major's up and stirring, he thought, then remembered that Arnold and part of K Troop had just returned from Kickapoo. Still, he thought defiantly, I ain't trespassing, and it ain't the major I came to see! His face was already set in surly lines of reckless indifference when Rachel opened the door, and by the time Phebe Tanner arrived, followed closely by an irate Major Arnold, his feet were firmly planted and his whole body set in a bull-like stubbornness.

"Why, Sergeant Maxwell, how good to see thee!" the girl exclaimed.

"Look here, Sergeant . . ." Arnold began angrily, but the girl interrupted him.

"Please, Major Arnold, I would like a word with Sergeant Maxwell if thee would be so good as to allow it."

"My dear young lady," Arnold said coldly, "I am not in the habit of having enlisted soldiers visit my quarters to speak to my guests. Now, then, Sergeant, what do you want anyway?"

Maxwell saluted. "Sir, I wish to speak to Miss Tanner." He returned the officer's hard stare a moment, then turned to the girl. "That is, ma'am, if it's all right with you?"

"Why, of course. As thee knows, I would wish to . . ." she began, but Arnold broke in curtly, "Another time, Sergeant. Miss Tanner has not even breakfasted yet. Whatever you have to say will keep to another time, I'm sure."

"Yes, sir," Maxwell replied obstinately, his blue eyes still upon

the girl's face, "but if it's fine with Miss Tanner, I reckon she might figure this urgent enough that I take a minute of her time. Begging your pardon, sir, I'll say it and be done with it then."

"I said *another time*, man!" Arnold cried furiously, taking Phebe's arm with one hand as though to draw her inside the house, while with the other he seized the door as if to slam it shut in the sergeant's face.

"No . . . please . . ." Phebe pulled against his restraining hand, freeing herself more abruptly than she intended, for she had no desire to be impolite or to cause a scene. Anger flared in Arnold's face, whitening his small mouth and darkening his eyes. Fortunately, Mary Arnold swept up behind him and caught him by the arm.

"Harry, for mercy's sake, what are you doing? she murmured; then, peering past him, saw the reddened Maxwell still doggedly entrenched on the porch. "Ah, good morning, Sergeant."

Maxwell's flush heightened beneath the gracious, patronizing tone, but he stood dumbly, waiting and wishing both in hell.

"Please . . ." Phebe said, her own face flushed with embarrassment. She glanced askance at Maxwell's face but could tell little of how he actually felt. He was rooted there, but the hands that turned his dragoon cap around and around seemed to express the agitation he hid behind a stubborn, blank stare. They were powerful hands, and the big brown fingers crushed the dusty brim. "Please, Mrs. Arnold, if thee would be so good as to excuse me a moment . . ."

"Of course, my dear. Come along, Harry."

Only then did they move off, Major Arnold with such obvious reluctance and displeasure that Phebe was frightened for her friend. However, he seemed not to notice. As soon as they were relatively alone, he blurted, "Maybe I ain't got no business to be here, ma'am, but I recollected how you said once you thought to be a schoolmarm in Oregon when you got there, and I . . . well, begging your pardon for tending to your concerns and all that, I reckoned maybe you wouldn't think it none too bad to be a schoolmarm in Leavenworth. I heard that this here preacher, this Reverend Wills, was looking for a schoolmarm and I thought . . . I thought . . ." He began to flounder badly, when, to his astonishment, she came joyfully to his rescue, a look of such relief mingled with excitement on her face that his jaw dropped.

"Oh, Sergeant Maxwell, thee is too good! Oh, what wonderful news! Thee cannot know . . . thee just cannot know! Is thee sure? A schoolteacher is really wanted? And I might do?"

"Well, yes, ma'am," he replied, pulling himself together. "I'm sure right enough. I went and talked to the Reverend. He figured on a man, but men're as scarce as hen's teeth in the Territory for schoolteaching, and he reckoned he was going to have to give up his school for the lack of a teacher. He's a Yankee, and he don't want no truck with slavery, so, when I told him you and your brother were Quakers, he was pleased right smart. He says he ain't got much of a school yet, no more'n two rooms, but he figures to make it grow. Seems like he's got big plans." He added this last apologetically, his hands still worrying his battered cap, though deep in his heart he said a silent prayer of thanks for the joyful reception she had given his chance idea. He was so relieved that she hadn't been angry with him for tending to what was obviously her own business and so surprised at her pleasure that sweat broke out again on his forehead.

"I cannot thank thee enough!" she exclaimed, realizing that she had been rescued once more by this taciturn, redheaded soldier, and feeling rather awed by the timeliness of his intervention.

"Good morning, Miss Tanner. Good morning, Sergeant." St. Clair came up the steps behind them. His step was jaunty, his face relaxed and cheerful, and in spite of her own concerns, Phebe noticed and was pleased. "You look as if you'd had good news, Miss Tanner."

"I have, oh, I have! Sergeant Maxwell has found a teaching place for me in Leavenworth. Isn't that grand?"

Maxwell flushed again and looked disconcerted. By Jesus, he thought, I never figured it would make her this happy!

"Why, that *is* fine!" St. Clair exclaimed, looking at the other man in surprise. "I knew you were uncertain about your plans, but I hadn't any idea that you were actively concerned yet in finding a place."

"I have waited far too long. It was shameful of me to allow ourselves to be a burden for so long. Mrs. Arnold has been too kind. When could I . . . when would it be possible, does thee know, for me to speak to the Reverend Wills?" she asked, turning eagerly back to Maxwell.

"I reckon if you—if you and your brother—was to want to see him right today, ma'am, why, I got the loan of a wagon and could take you 'most any time."

"Thee could take us now . . . this minute?" Phebe asked, hesitating a moment and avoiding St. Clair's puzzled stare.

Maxwell nodded, so pleased that he could not trust himself to speak.

"Then Jen and I must leave at once," she declared, and with such relief and determination in her voice that both men stared.

"At once? But why?" St. Clair glanced askance at the flimsy wagon.

"We have trespassed long enough upon Mrs. Arnold's generosity."

"But Mary has been only too happy to have you," he protested.

"She has been very good, but we must leave. Thee does not understand, but we must and at once. We will stay at the hotel if necessary." She spoke recklessly, knowing she had no concrete plans, yet decision was more pleasant than vacillation and she could feel relief with just the saying of it.

"There'd be no need for that, ma'am," Maxwell put in abruptly. "The Reverend aimed to bring his wife out to the Territory, but when he saw how the Law and Order men were carrying on, I reckon he changed his mind. He asked me did I reckon you might like the place he aimed to bring his missus to, a cabin out a bit from town?" He finished up quickly, the words tumbling out on top of each other in his haste to get it all said, and then he waited, even his hands ceasing to turn and twist his cap.

"But look here, man," St. Clair protested angrily, "she can't just run off to see this . . . this Reverend Wills like this! And surely not to move into some cabin sight unseen today! Why, you can't really be serious about this?" He turned back to Phebe, his face distressed.

"I am quite serious. Thee must believe me, Lieutenant St. Clair," she replied coolly. "I shall go make my excuses to Mrs. Arnold and pack what few things we have. If thee will excuse me. . . ?" She did not look at St. Clair, and it was a warning he did not heed.

"But this is senseless!" he exclaimed. "You mustn't run off like this! Why, you need . . . couldn't Mrs. Arnold at least go along as a chaperone?" He glanced again at the wagon. "Surely you could wait long enough for me to borrow Major Arnold's rockaway!"

Phebe looked at him now. She recalled the Negro at Sentinel Hill on his knees in the dust, and remembering this, mentally placed him with the Arnolds, including him in her angry shock and disbelief. Of course! He was from the South. He'd been brought up with slavery and doubtless found no evil in it, no cause for shame or guilt. Naturally he could not and would not understand.

Color rose under her tanned cheeks, but her glance was steady. "I hardly think that necessary," she replied evenly. "I have been a long time without a chaperone. Please do not concern thyself so, Lieutenant. Jen and I shall be quite all right." She turned and left them, vanishing into the quarters.

St. Clair stared thoughtfully at the other man, embarrassed by her cool rebuff and not at all sure what, if anything, he should do. On his side, Maxwell felt no confusion, only mingled delight and pride, and a swelling sense of elation. He stared belligerently at the officer as if daring him to interfere.

Well, this is certainly an odd turn of events, St. Clair thought. How strange that she is determined to leave, and at once! Could it be out of fondness for the sergeant here? No, no, she is far too young. He dismissed the notion with distaste. Surely, Maxwell's to be trusted. More than that, he knows I shall keep an eye on these two. Of course, I can ride to town and check on this Reverend without seeming to concern myself too much with her affairs. With this thought some of his uneasiness, although none of his bewilderment, disappeared.

By the time Phebe returned with Jen, followed by a protesting hostess, St. Clair had collected himself enough to offer the tentative suggestion that he accompany them to town.

"Thank thee, but I believe Sergeant Maxwell has arranged everything very satisfactorily," she answered coolly.

"I am very sorry to see you do this," he replied in a low voice. "I still do not understand why you must act so abruptly."

"Thee would not understand, perhaps," she replied in as low a tone. "I must do what I consider right, even though it may seem strange. I—my conscience will not let me do otherwise. I am not like thee—so able to see both sides. Jen and I cannot condone slaveholding, but more than that, we cannot be passive parties to the whipping of a slave such as I witnessed this morning."

Maxwell soberly watched dismay spread across the officer's face

as he helped the girl to the wagon-seat and swung the boy up beside her.

“Whipping? What whipping?” St. Clair cried, ignoring Mary Arnold fussing beside him. The sergeant only shrugged his shoulders and grinned, letting the triumph he felt almost bursting inside him come to the surface in one brief, hard smile.

FIFTEEN

"Mercy, what on earth got into the child?" Mary Arnold watched in bewilderment as the wagon rounded the parade ground, trailing dust along its wobbling course. "I simply do not understand. Certainly, Quakers do not seem to learn gratitude at their mother's knee!"

Disturbed, St. Clair replied slowly, "She said something about a whipping, Mary. She seemed very upset."

"Well, I don't see why!" she replied shortly. "It was really none of her concern. Come, let us join Harry and have a cup of coffee." She turned, entering the house, taking it for granted that he followed.

Troubled, he hesitated, watching until the wagon disappeared beyond the trees. A four-mule ambulance raised dust on the hospital road, and over by Headquarters a bugler blew for mounted drill. Several Indian women hurried across the grass, baskets of wash in their arms, their bright calico shirts vivid in the sun.

"Coming, Larry?"

He sighed and went in. "But I don't understand, Mary. A whipping. . .?" He stopped when he saw Henry Arnold seated at the

table. "Good morning, sir," he said, saluting. Arnold merely glanced at him and went on eating.

"Rachel, bring a fresh pot of coffee, please. You needn't look to me for explanations, Larry, for I have none," Mary continued in hurt tones. "I really have no idea why that child packed up and rushed off in that fashion and I . . ."

"Don't be a fool, Mary," Arnold cut in. "It's very simple. The girl's Quaker conscience couldn't stomach Rachel's whipping this morning. If you'd had any eyes in your head, you would have noticed that she was quite upset when she came down. No doubt she heard the commotion and witnessed the little scene from her window."

"You had Rachel whipped!" St. Clair exclaimed, rounding on him so incredulously that the look and the action bordered on rudeness. He stared at the older officer. His closest friend from Carlisle Barracks, Lieutenant William Price, had told him something of Arnold when he'd joined the First Dragoons the preceding spring. Bill Price, like Arnold, was a West Pointer, but this had not silenced him. "He's a strange man, Larry, and his reputation out here is nothing short of legendary, or was until he was reprimanded at Bird's court-martial. If he conceives a grudge against a man, the fellow might as well shoot himself and be done with it, for the major'll hound him until he does! I mean that literally because it's happened! But then *you* have nothing to worry about. Family, money, and best of all, a nice strong tie to Washington. No, you have nothing to worry about, old man. Without 'em, you might have a rough time under him because you're so goddam stiff-necked. Excuse me, son, for speaking so plainly."

"You're excused, Bill," St. Clair had replied, amused.

"Thank you, sir. As I said, you're a gentleman, and as such you'll be tolerated. Hell, Larry, he's a first-class snob, and an even better fighting man. Poor devil, he married money and Eastern Shore, and has spent all his time since living up to it."

St. Clair knew Bill Price was not aware that he had known Mary Arnold from childhood, and he let that pass. There were other rumors, other things said, less open and direct than Price's comments. He had heard garbled accounts of a deserter shot through the head by the major after the man had surrendered to the dragoons. There were several stories of the out-of-hand shooting of

Indian prisoners; one story recounting how the dragoons had brought in eight or ten braves whom the major had ordered shot one by one, letting the more bloodthirsty dragoons scalp each as he fell before the eyes of his still-living comrades. The Indians waiting their turn for knife and gun had never turned a hair but had, in fact, stood by as unconcerned as if they were at a buffalo butchering. This, it was said, had so enraged the major that he had shot the last brave himself, scalping the man before he stopped twitching.

Yet, St. Clair thought, there are a thousand horror stories on the plains, and any man of reputation is dogged by a dozen of them. Also, to give the devil his due, there were other, contradictory stories, stories of a different stripe. There was, for instance, the story of a young Indian guide who had misled a dragoon detachment on an attempted shorter crossing of the Cimarron, and the command had come close to perishing from thirst. Some of the men had wanted to kill the guide out of hand, but Arnold had prevented it, keeping the young Indian in his own tent for protection.

While St. Clair was preoccupied with the riddle this man presented, Arnold was summing up his junior coldly, remembering bitterly the change in Mary's voice the night before when she had introduced them. Hearing that same gay, light note return now to his wife's voice, he stared with rancor at the younger officer, who was everything he was not—tall, handsome, obviously a gentleman. The young fop—born with a silver spoon in his mouth! Indignant over the whipping of a slave, was he? The sensitive gentleman. No wonder he was too good to fight the Cheyenne; no doubt he had no wish to soil his uniform. Aloud, he said coldly, "Why, yes, Lieutenant, I had Rachel whipped."

St. Clair's eyes fell away from that hot, angry stare, and he turned back to Mary, murmuring, "Then I should think that might explain Miss Tanner's hurried departure, Mary."

"Do sit down, Larry, and have your coffee while it's hot. I'm very sorry about the whole affair, but the child should not have been so sensitive. Mercy, you speak as if you weren't from the South, Larry, when I know you were brought up at a black mammy's knee just as I was. And leisure and comfort are quite as important to you as to thousands of other gentlemen," she chided. "I think it's very silly for people to get so upset in this matter, anyway."

"However, Miss Tanner is a Quaker, and it is understandable that she should be upset."

"Yes, and I'm sorry. People are so touchy on this slavery business these days, when really, you know, it's not their concern. I hope you haven't turned Abolitionist, Larry," she said, smiling, reaching out to pat his arm lightly.

"Never fear," he replied, laughing, forgetting for the moment his concern for the Tanners in the pleasure of hearing the warm, affectionate tone in her voice. He'd forgotten how much he used to enjoy bantering with her, matching his wits against hers.

"I remember, do I not, that your father freed all his slaves seven or eight years ago?"

"Yes, you remember correctly. I'm afraid, actually, that Mother deserves the credit. She talked him into it."

"Credit? Ah, there you go again, talking like an Abolitionist!"

He laughed. "My dear Mary, you've forgotten that I come from a long line of politicians, renowned for their ability to talk sincerely about anything. Fence-straddling was taught me at my mother's knee, let us say."

As their talk took up their families and passed on to old and mutual friends, Arnold sat glowering at the end of the table, growing more and more vindictive as he felt more and more excluded. This was a realm in which he had never moved nor probably ever would, and his recognition of this fact fed his anger.

In an Indian camp somewhere he had once seen a half-grown wolf confined in a kind of wicker cage made of bent willow limbs, and he'd never forgotten the image of that animal's terrible unease. The wolf cub was never still; he chewed at the ropes that tied him, pawed at the wickerwork, moved his head from side to side, his yellow eyes glaring balefully out at a world that held nothing for him except fear. He had felt a certain kinship with the captured wolf at the time; he was reminded of it now, and during a pause in their chatter, all inane and foolish to him, he spoke up suddenly, handing the younger man the sugar bowl as Mary poured him a second cup of coffee, "You know, Lieutenant, it's rather a coincidence that you should concern yourself with Rachel's punishment this morning. The corporal sent over to carry it out brought a note from Captain Green notifying me that you've been transferred to my command. I understand you were with B Troop this summer?"

"Yes, sir, I was." St. Clair transferred his attention as politely as he could, but his reluctance did not escape the other. Arnold's lips twitched beneath his mustache and his eyes grew hot. But when he spoke his voice was controlled, even lazy.

"Hmmm. Had a quiet campaign, I imagine. Haven't had much trouble on the plains these last few years. Got the damn tribes licked by now, and with a little courage we can keep 'em that way."

St. Clair flushed faintly and straightened in his chair, suddenly alert.

"Oh, Harry, let's not talk Indians and dragoons!" Mary put in quickly and shot him a warning look, her thick dark brows drawing together in a frown of annoyance.

"This isn't really army talk, my dear. I just wanted the lieutenant to know that even the general was concerned with his welfare and that he, too, sent me a note concerning his transfer, a confidential note. Would you care to see it, Lieutenant?"

He did not think it necessary to say that the general's note only recommended St. Clair as a promising but inexperienced young officer, whom he felt would derive much benefit serving under an old plainsman such as himself, that he alone could turn this green youngster into a seasoned man. This was patent flattery in its way, but the general thought highly of Arnold, and was sincere in his reasons for placing St. Clair under his command. It was the corporal, an old soldier with many years of service in Arnold's unit, who informed the major of the rest of the Platte Valley story, with all the rumors he had heard from friends in B Troop, and it was because of the corporal's story that Arnold, seeing the color rise in the younger man's face, was satisfied. Ah, he thought, so this sorry example of an officer, commissioned through political influence, has the decency to feel shame! Gentleman, yes, and a goddam coward, good for nothing but to grace a woman's arm. His thoughts retraced his hard years out here, the many times he'd deliberately set his own life as forfeit if he erred, and contempt intensified his rage, while his wife's immediate dismay salved his pride. "Well, would you care to read it, Lieutenant?" he replied.

"No, sir, I don't believe that's necessary. The general gave me his reasons for transferring me. If you'll excuse me, Mary, I must see to the shoeing of my horse. Sir, with your permission?" St. Clair rose, bowed, and stood waiting a moment. He had not understood

the other's antagonism at first; he understood it now. When Arnold nodded curtly, he swung around and left.

"Henry, how could you? After all my efforts to make things right, after all my work to make him and everyone else forget this unfortunate affair! You . . . you have to come charging in to smash it all. It was for *your* sake in the end, all for your sake! His father . . ."

He leaped up and came around the table to bend over her, seizing both her arms in his thin, powerful fingers, and for an instant Mary Arnold felt a faint flicker of fear. Very rarely had she feared him, but lately, ever since the court-martial and his reprimand, she'd been wary of provoking his fury.

"Are you so sure?" he hissed. "Are you so sure it's all for my sake? You do all this, entertain him, try to make others forget that he's a coward and a weakling . . . for my sake? Were the others for my sake? My God, but you take me for a fool, don't you, Mary?" He shook her a little, his grip tightening.

Color rose beneath her pale skin and her heavy brows drew together. She did not wince or struggle, even though his fingers dug painfully into her flesh.

"You may believe me or not, as you wish, Harry, but let me go or so help me God, I'll leave you!"

He released her abruptly and straightened, smiling. "Don't threaten, Mary. You know me better than that, I trust. Because I may have seemed tolerant in the past when you chose to flirt with a handsome lieutenant does not mean that I enjoy watching you act the silly maiden, nor that my toleration is necessarily unlimited!"

"Toleration?" she cried, and laughed thinly. "Your toleration? Why, you acted a jealous ass!"

He flushed, swung around and stalked from the room, leaving her to stare after him with angry eyes. My God, why don't I have the courage to leave him and be done? she thought bitterly. He is surely mad!

Yet, she knew why she did not. Not only would her family disapprove and make that disapproval evident, but Harry had his own fascination, and she was sure that in the end he would go far. He had the ruthlessness to back his ambition and he was clever, too clever sometimes, she thought. While she felt no love for him now,

she could and did admire him, she could respect his determination. But she had no intention of allowing him to dictate to her, nor of lapsing into stagnation and boredom while his star soared. Like him, she loved to move among uncertain factors, to pit her strength and wits against another's; more than that, she liked to search out and expose another's weaknesses, just as one might solve a puzzle. She could not let other people alone; she had to play upon them as if they were instruments. This was especially so if they were men, for men held a greater challenge and she felt her own power more acutely when she collided with theirs. In any case, she had long ago found the key to getting her own way with her husband, and she never hesitated to use it. It was so simple that she sometimes found it ludicrous. He needed her. He could not get along without her.

She might not have been so complacent, though, if she could have read her husband's mind. He left her angrily, determined that this time at least he would not play the fool. This time he would strike back and, with luck, the first real blow should be his. Not a year ago she'd dangled a pink-cheeked young idiot under his nose. He'd been too busy defending himself at Bird's court-martial to pay much heed, though he'd been aware of the whispers and sly laughter at his expense. Never again! Not if he had to call the man out! Not even if he were dismissed from the army for it!

Cold-bloodedly he set out to sate his anger and soothe his ruffled pride. He was in no hurry. He had plenty of time, and he was certain from what he had heard and seen of St. Clair that this was the kind of man who hung himself, with or without assistance. He would do no more than insure it, and since he considered, with some amusement, that the younger man had already fitted the noose about his neck by the Platte affair, all he needed to do was to destroy what was left of his pride and self-confidence, to leave him no dignity before his men, to see to it that he made enough mistakes and blunders to doubt his own fitness as an officer. Hell, he thought, there's no place in the army for oversensitive gentlemen! There's no place for the white-handed and spoon-fed, and by God, I'll see to it that the service is well rid of him!

He began to ask questions, to find out all he could about St. Clair, and almost at once he learned, unofficially, for he had contacts among the enlisted men built up through the years by

judicious use of prestige and favor, that the forthright Sergeant Maxwell of B Troop had requested a transfer shortly after the unit had returned to the fort, and that he had done so in an effort to get out from under Lieutenant St. Clair's command.

"He don't have no more use for the lieutenant than he do for a damned redskin!" Arnold's informant had said. "He never let on, but there weren't a man there couldn't see what he was thinking, out on the Platte. I figured he'd try to get out of B Troop first chance he got, Major."

Arnold asked for and got Maxwell assigned to K Troop, then promptly placed him back under St. Clair, much to the latter's astonishment. At first he was flattered, thinking Maxwell had elected to follow him from one troop to the other. But he could not delude himself long. Maxwell's frustration and sullenness were far too obvious, and in the end St. Clair guessed, at least in part, what the situation was, although he placed the blame for it on the incomprehensible and twisted coincidences of army red tape. The last thing he wanted was a disgruntled noncommissioned officer in his new detachment. He wanted to begin with a clean slate, using what experience he had now gained as an officer to plot a less tortured way. He hated the thought of another's dislike riding at his back, and so suggested that Maxwell put in for another transfer. The sergeant only shrugged, replying that he doubted the papers would get past the major, and that the lieutenant might as well forget it. He would do his best, but if the chance ever did come, he would sure as hell take it!

However, Maxwell wouldn't have laid much money on that chance ever coming. He knew the major well and resigned himself to being stuck in K Troop, Fort Leavenworth's "Royal Guard," as it was contemptuously called by the hard-riding, Indian-fighting dragoons of the other troops. God help us, he thought more than once in the succeeding weeks, if we're ever broke loose from the fort and see a little action!

The rest of Arnold's strategy was more involved. It would take time. Knowing this, he set himself to it coldly. St. Clair's assurance had been badly shaken, and he must now find means to shatter it further. Whenever he had occasion to issue an order to the junior officer, he deliberately worded it in such a way as to leave an element of doubt as to exactly how the command was to be executed,

and at the same leave himself leeway to find fault with whatever means St. Clair used to execute it. Also, he managed as often as possible to do his faultfinding before the lieutenant's men, while careful to display no overt animosity. He even endeavored to give an impression of unusual patience, for he wanted the fellow to have no one and nothing to blame but himself. The success of his plan depended on St. Clair's capacity for self-criticism and self-blame, a weakness Arnold had clearly perceived and upon which he knew he could capitalize. He did not want to bring on himself any criticism for harshness; he was aware that he must keep his temper well in check in the matter. He was also aware that he could not afford the wrath of a Randolph St. Clair, nor of any of his associates in the War Department, and so he moved slowly and with care.

Thus the pattern was begun . . . Arnold, with every hope of bringing about the ruin of his wife's young protégé, and St. Clair with no comprehension of either the scheme itself or the reason for the older man's malice. He was still too concerned in exorcising the image of a bloodied horse, the mangled remains lashed across a dragoon's saddle, and the implications these had for him alone, to pay much attention to the present.

SIXTEEN

The cabin sat alone in a grove of black walnuts and big, dry-barked cottonwoods. A snake fence enclosed it and the small garden patch. Beyond, a twenty-acre meadow extended to a small stream, which wandered around the curve of a hillside to empty a mile or so away into Salt Creek. Small, eighteen by twenty feet, the structure boasted several luxuries: a large window, unglazed, to the right of the door, and a loft covering half the large single room and reached by steps cut into the logs of one wall. Behind it were a big three-sided shed, with stalls for four animals, and a conical pile of hay and corn.

Phebe came to a standstill on the path leading to the tiny spring-house above the garden patch, and stood a moment happily surveying her home, unperturbed by the gloom of the November day, the fragile ghosts of last summer's corn drooping among the brittle weeds in the garden below. Carefully, she set the milk pail by her feet, that she might have unrestricted pleasure in contemplating her domain.

In the distance, Pilot Knob rose over the scattering of buildings which was the town of Leavenworth, while off to the left she could

see the white walls of the fort. Her gaze drifted to the cabin, from which blue smoke rose lazily into the overcast sky. Things had turned out very well. Her school wages were at least sufficient to keep them in groceries, and Jen earned a bit extra by marketing the milk from their four cows in the town.

Mr. Wills chose his cabin site well, she thought, smiling a little. She had found him an odd man, taciturn and shy and a little too pious for her own taste. She was used to a less ostentatious religion, a calmer acceptance of God and duty. Still, Mr. Wills was a good-hearted man, and lonely. He was a frequent visitor to the cabin, having few friends among the pro-slavery folk in Leavenworth. It was a shame that his fainthearted wife had not seen fit to join him on the border. However, he seemed happy with the school, which already showed signs of success. Between twenty and thirty parents had voiced their interest, and seventeen children were officially enrolled. Oddly enough, in spite of his known Abolitionist sentiments—and by his very nature he could not keep them secret—well over half of these were children of pro-slavery parents.

The Tanners had little chance to feel deserted. Mr. Wills came, and several of the wives of Free-Soil squatters living in the valley were only too delighted to drop their burdensome chores for an hour or two of socializing. Then, to Phebe's surprise, Mary Arnold, accompanied by St. Clair, began to come out from the fort. She was not sure, at first, whether she welcomed these visits, for she had intended to cut all ties to the fort. But soon she found herself looking forward to their coming, anticipating Mrs. Arnold's gay accounts of the happenings there. But while she was outwardly occupied, Phebe was lonely. She belonged to no particular group, she could not be a part of the army at the fort, nor could she be a part of the noisily pro-slavery Leavenworth coterie, and she had little in common with the squatters' wives or their grown daughters. Her education had been too good, her life too gentle.

It was little wonder, then, that she found herself enjoying the visits of her friends, and that she accepted again the comradeship the older women proffered. Her kinship with Mary Arnold and Larry St. Clair was strong, too strong. They were fundamentally her kind of people, even though the military background against which they moved had little enough in common with her own quiet upbringing. It was a matter of taste and education, a style of life,

if not of faith, which drew her. They talked of things which interested her, they looked upon life with a gusto which intrigued her, and they, too, were young. It was in a sense the pavilion of music and dancing, and there was no uncle now to draw her back when she strayed. So, in spite of the intense moral struggle seething about her, and in spite of the demands of her own conscience, she turned again to them in pleasure.

As she stood on the hillside, she was aware suddenly of the nature and the presence of this struggle. It seemed to her that even the loveliness of the valley was tainted by the coarse cries of hate she heard daily in Leavenworth, the frenetic headlines and editorials of the *Herald*, the sly insinuations of her pupils' parents as they smugly proclaimed the right to uphold slavery, even its necessity. All these things disturbed her lifelong habit of calm, yet they also drew her toward the fierce pronouncement of a righteous cause which she found all but irresistible in the Reverend Wills's ardent faith.

It was not difficult to understand why people were so stirred, and it was easy to see that there could be no halfway house of emotion here; yet a native dislike for shrillness and for anger kept her hesitating upon the brink of complete involvement. There was no question as to where her sympathies lay, but the note of hysteria she sometimes felt in the attitudes and arguments of the Abolitionists put her off a bit. The Reverend Wills, himself, sometimes did not appear entirely rational. Then again, for all her growing concern over the struggle going on around her, she was still bewildered by the inconsistency of the words and actions on the one hand, and the character of the people who expounded them on the other. People she met—parents of her charges, storemen and professional men contributing to the school—people all avowedly pro-slavery and willing to shed blood to keep this institution, even though they, themselves, might not own a single Negro, seemed often the pleasantest, the kindest of souls, genuinely interested in her as a person and in her problems. In general, they often proved to be the very antithesis of all she had heard and read of slave-owners, of supporters of a social custom she considered inhuman and inexcusably evil.

She thought, with a sigh, that she did not understand this, nor probably ever would. The sound of hooves interrupted her musing

and she turned to see a horseman riding briskly from the direction of town. She smiled, recognizing the swing of the rider, the gait of the horse. Here at least was no real problem for her conscience, nor any bewildering double standard of intention and behavior. She picked up her pail and started down the path. Sergeant Maxwell come to court, she thought, amused, knowing that he would be glum through nine-tenths of his visit. The other tenth would be given to sudden outbursts of chatter which would drain him and leave him mute again. His face would be flushed, he would be overwarm and restless, fidgeting if he sat, shifting his weight from foot to foot if he stood. Yet even as she was amused, she felt an odd stirring and a quick rush of excitement. Except for one quiet Quaker lad her own age, no man had ever courted her before, but inexperienced as she was, she could sense and appreciate the difference between interest, polite and friendly—like St. Clair's—and Philip Maxwell's centered attention. She could also, with a sigh, wish things reversed.

As she came around the corner of the cabin she found him dismounted and tying his horse to the fence. He saw her at once, made a clumsy rush to relieve her of the heavy pail, spilling milk in his haste and flushing brick-red at his awkwardness. Pretending not to notice, she exclaimed, "My, but thee looks very polished this morning!"

He blushed even harder, but his clear blue eyes softened with pleasure and he grinned, both ashamed of letting a mere girl disconcert him so and amused at the picture he knew he cut but was so helpless to alter. He could be utterly miserable one minute, laughing at himself the next, but through it all his goal was steady as a star; this was the girl he wanted, the only female he had ever wanted as his own. And he aimed to get her. In the meantime what he went through hardly mattered. The end was worth the means.

And when I get her, he thought, I'm through with the army and campaigning. I'm going to take up a claim and build me a cabin twice as large as this one here. He caught his breath suddenly, seeing himself and this girl and a lonely cabin somewhere. Just me and her and the place lonely as hell! Jesus, but a man can want, and waiting and fooling around be damn hard! It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman. He'd not been able to bring himself to make the rounds of the houses on the levee since his

return to the fort. With some vague idea of staying pure he had kept away from the whores, and body and soul were starved. As he followed her up the path, lugging the heavy pail, there was an ache in his belly and it was all he could do to keep from dropping the pail and reaching for her. By the time they reached the cabin door his heart was pounding, the pulse beat hard in the hollow of his throat, and he sweated as if he'd just run a race or transferred a wagonload of ammunition.

"Will thee have coffee, Philip?" she asked, not suspecting his anguish, nor hearing the quick catch of his breath as she spoke his given name, a thing she had done only once before.

"It would be a pleasure, ma'am," he answered with difficulty as he followed her inside, setting the pail carefully on the bench beside the door. A fire burned cheerfully in the big fireplace at the end of the room, and Jen crouched on the floor before it, mending a bridle.

Maxwell was actually relieved to see the boy there. He was no longer very sure of his self-control, and he knew he must, above all else, keep from alarming her. Returning Jen's greeting, he went over to examine the bridle. "Broke the cheekstrap, eh?" he asked, the tightness gradually easing from his throat, the tension from his body.

The boy grinned. "Old Maud tossed me into a hazel bush when I was out with the cows this morning. I grabbed for something and that's what I caught! Is thee allowing me coffee, Pheb?"

"As a treat, then, in honor of Sergeant Maxwell."

"Thee is good to come," Jen replied, giving the man a mock salute.

"Oh, oh, I believe we are to have more company! Jen, run and see who is coming. I am sure I heard the sound of wheels in the lane."

A shadow of annoyance crossed Maxwell's face. He said nothing. He had already lapsed into his usual taciturn state, but he began to fidget. Heartlessly, Phebe wanted to laugh at his plainly disgruntled expression.

"Mrs. Arnold and the lieutenant!" Jen called from the doorway, his voice mirroring his friend's annoyance. "Could I say thee is not here, Pheb?"

"Mercy, no! That would be a bald-faced lie! No, no, thee mind thy manners, Jen Tanner, and run out to hold the horses."

"Aw . . ." His expression rebellious, Jen dashed off while Maxwell's gloom deepened visibly. Oh, my, Phebe thought, it's not hard to see whose side Jen is on. Poor man, poor man! And she almost laughed aloud.

The rockaway came jolting and swaying up the lane as Jen ran down the path. At the sight of Major Arnold's blacks trotting in perfect step, their harness and sleek hides shining in the sun, the boy stopped in his tracks, forgetting his animosity temporarily, his face reflecting his pleasure at the sight.

"Howdy, Jen Tanner!" Mrs. Arnold cried, mimicking the standard greeting of the region. St. Clair threw him the reins and jumped to the ground, turning to help his companion down.

"Mercy, someone is here!" she exclaimed, seeing the tethered horse beyond his shoulder.

St. Clair looked around and recognized the animal. "Isn't that Sergeant Maxwell's horse, Jen?" he asked, helping the boy with the tie-rein.

"Yes, sir. He came just a bit ago," Jen replied, grinning maliciously.

Mary Arnold frowned. "Really, Larry," she said in a low voice as they moved up the path toward the cabin, "he should be discouraged. I think him very bold to come here, for Jen can hardly qualify as a chaperone."

"Chaperone? My dear Mary, what an odd sound that has out here on the border!" he exclaimed, forgetting that he had once used the word himself.

"That may be, but a young girl still has to take care of her reputation. Phebe is far too pretty to have male callers without causing comment."

Although he smiled and held his peace, St. Clair was disturbed. He could not have said why exactly, but when Phebe opened the door to them he found himself observing her closely. Lord, he thought, a little startled, she is a pretty girl! Somehow, too, she seemed older and more serene, and he wondered briefly if this new-found maturity might not come from being in love. There Maxwell stood, rugged and solid, and handsome in a way. Certainly the unusual color of his hair, the clearness of his blue eyes in sunburnt

skin above a thick red beard were attractive, and, clearly, St. Clair thought with a trace of honest envy, he is a man among men. Does he come out here often? he wondered, and was surprised at the increasing uneasiness the thought brought him.

Reflectively, he turned his attention back to the girl, observing again that Mary was quite right. She was wearing a blue gingham dress, the color dark enough to match her eyes. Sunlight from the window drew reddish lights from her brown hair, golden tones from her tanned skin. As she exchanged pleasantries with Mary, she seemed assured and calm, yet he noticed that she moved with shyness, a slight ungainliness, and her walk was almost a boyish stride. But when she moved quickly and unthinkingly she had a lovely, unconscious grace. She's like a woods animal, he thought, and smiled, reminded of a young doe he'd come upon in the woods a few weeks ago. It had been early in the morning, and the trees still shrouded by cool, clammy mist. His horse's hooves had been muffled by the damp dust of the trail, so that he'd been able to approach the feeding doe quite closely, watching as she browsed in the gray underbrush, her slender neck stretching, her small velvety head high in the misty tracery. Her steps were small, her movements flowed until suddenly she caught his scent. Then, all her silent grace startled, her whole body turned rigid for the space of a heartbeat and within seconds she was off in great, soaring bounds. With her going the trees had seemed to drip again, and he had noticed the dank, rotten smell of the forest rising on the chilly mist.

"How does the teaching go?" Mary was asking as Phebe moved about, setting out extra cups and fetching thick, fresh cream from the bench outside the door. "Oh, do sit down, Sergeant!" she exclaimed rather curtly to Maxwell, whose glum surveillance of herself and St. Clair was making her nervous. "I suppose we have intruded upon your visit, and I'm sorry, but we hadn't thought to find company ahead of us so early in the morning!"

"No, ma'am," Maxwell replied stupidly and remained standing sullenly apart.

"The teaching, did thee ask?" Phebe interpolated hastily. Oh dear, she thought, poor Philip! Aloud she continued, "Oh, I've overcome my first fright and now the children mind me as if I were some terrible ogre!"

"Mercy, my dear, it would petrify me to have to face a whole

roomful of little brats! I do not see how you manage them all! I am sure that they would spend the living day making faces at me and bombarding me with spitballs and sass, and I would be able to do no more than spend my time thumping hands or whatever it is one does to keep order!"

"Oh, it's very simple. If they are bad I have them write exercises and that is threat enough!"

Aware of his sergeant glowering beside him, St. Clair made an effort to put him at his ease. "Come, Sergeant Maxwell, we might as well keep the ladies company in their chitchat. That coffee smells wonderful!" He drew out a chair for the other and sniffed appreciatively as the aroma of boiling coffee filled the cabin.

However, he succeeded only in galvanizing Maxwell into action. "I'd best be going now, ma'am," he blurted to Phebe. "I'll be back another day . . ."

"Oh, but please . . . the coffee is just now ready. Can't thee . . ." she began, distressed by his obvious discomfort, but he moved stubbornly toward the door. She could guess that he must feel trapped here with his immediate commander and the wife of a field-grade officer. She had fathomed enough of army life to catch the firm distinctions drawn between enlisted men and officers, and she could sympathize with his uneasiness. How stupid, she thought, annoyed by such a display of rigid class lines, that a commission was considered all that was necessary to differentiate a gentleman. She followed Maxwell to the door, placing a hand upon his sleeve. "I am sorry that thee must hurry away," she said in a low voice. "Can thee come to dinner tomorrow? On Sunday Jen and I dine at two o'clock and we would love to have thee join us."

His sullen face brightened and he nodded. "Thank you, ma'am. That'd be a pleasure." He hurried out, and a moment later the sound of his horse's hooves echoed from the road as he went off at a canter.

Mary Arnold exchanged glances with St. Clair and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, "You see? Now confess that there is something in this!"

He smiled at her but turned as Phebe rejoined them. We've upset her by driving him off, he thought, for her face was troubled, and she did not look at either of them as she prepared the coffee. Perhaps, though, she is only upset because our presence embarrassed

him and she is kind. Who can tell? Women, he thought, glancing at her preoccupied face, are the original sphinxes! Or else I know so little of the creatures that I am blind! Obviously they are far more difficult to understand than men. Here is Mary about to launch herself on one of those interminable, "My dear, do you really think you should" lectures in which she will be far too frank about minding Miss Tanner's business, and about which the poor girl will try dreadfully hard to be polite! Can I forestall this? Aloud, he asked, "What did you do with your stock, Miss Tanner? Did Jen tell me that you were able to sell the wagon to the Russell-Majors people?"

She glanced up, a little startled by the loudness of his voice. "Why, yes. They gave us a good price for it and took the oxen, too. I was very glad to get rid of that terrible old thing! We kept the cows and, of course, Old Maud and Rob Roy. Jen has gone into the milk business and is doing very well. He will make our fortune for us, won't thee, Jen?"

The boy grinned. "I've been making three dollars a week," he said with pride, and added in retaliation, with a sly glance for his sister, "If only Pheb wouldn't be such a hog about Rob Roy, maybe I'd make more. She makes me use Old Maud in the wagon and it takes me hours to deliver the milk!"

Phebe laughed. "Now, thee knows, Jen Tanner, the saddle will not stay upon that fat mare's back!"

"Do you mean to say that you ride to school each day?" Mary Arnold asked, completely diverted.

"Oh, yes, I much prefer to ride. Rob Roy has very fine gaits. My uncle bought him for me when he was just a colt and we grew up together, so to speak."

"I trust you ride sidesaddle!"

St. Clair laughed at the suspicion in Mary's voice.

"Sidesaddle? Mercy no! We haven't got one, and if we did I would not use it, for I've never ridden any other way than astride. And," Phebe replied, laughing and catching St. Clair's amused glance, "if thee is so curious I will tell thee that I wear an old pair of my uncle's trousers beneath my skirt. It's quite proper!"

Mary was annoyed to find them both laughing at her. Her own wit was ready enough, but like most witty people she could not bear laughter directed against herself, and now she retorted sharply,

"Well, you sound very unconventional, I must say! I suppose it's practical enough, especially in this weather. A schoolmarm in trousers! I can't say as I've heard the like before!"

"Never fear," Phebe replied tranquilly, "I am quite ladylike. When I arrive I remove the trousers. Lieutenant, may I pour thee another cup?"

"Please." Still laughing, he held out his cup, but seeing Mary's obvious annoyance he sobered. He hadn't had much to laugh about these last weeks, for he hadn't left all his problems at B Troop, and the fresh beginning he had hoped to make had somehow eluded him. He was not quite sure why, but nothing he did seemed to turn out right; there was always something he'd overlooked, and he was beginning to be seriously disturbed. Only this morning, through some mix-up of orders which seemed now to be his fault, he had not posted guard at the supply depot, although he could have sworn that Major Arnold had assigned his section of the troop to this task for the following week. It was this vagueness of memory which dismayed him. He didn't seem to be able to get things straight or to remember them clearly, and during much of the time he was on duty he was uneasy for fear he'd left something undone, some detail overlooked, some order misunderstood. He supposed that because he'd been so deeply upset by the affair on the South Platte, he'd not yet regained self-confidence. He tried not to think beyond this explanation, to wonder if he'd ever had the capacity for being an officer.

"Well," he heard Mary say rather waspishly, "it is most unconventional! And un . . . un-Quakerish, I should think! Can it be, Phebe, that you are not so much a Quaker any more as a . . . a pioneer?"

Phebe smiled, hesitating only a second before replying quietly, "That may be true to some extent, but thee should know that I am still a Quaker, and worse still, a Yankee. Yet, after all, a Quaker lives very simply and so does, it seems, a pioneer. Therefore, the two are not so irreconcilable as might be supposed."

"But as a pioneer, then, wouldn't you defend yourself against . . . well, the Indians? And isn't it un-Quakerish to bear arms? I see a gun above the fireplace and I suppose it is there to be used," Mary Arnold continued, determined to recoup herself for the laughter they had had at her expense.

"The gun? Oh, that was my uncle's. He had little thought to use

it against the Indians, I think, but only to hunt wild game if we were ever hard-pressed."

"Ah, but do you not think that to display it so prominently goes against your professed faith?"

St. Clair held his breath, afraid now that she had gone too far, but the girl only smiled and said quietly, "I think one may hang a gun upon the wall without being committed to use it. It is when one hangs weapons upon oneself," and she gave his pistol and saber a meaningful glance, "that one may be accused of the intention of using them."

He burst out laughing. "There, Mary, you cannot trap her, no matter how you try. Well, Miss Tanner, even if there is no doubt about your intentions, I am glad just the same to see that gun hanging there. There is reason enough to have it on display these days in the Territory."

Phoebe eyed the gun thoughtfully, hardly hearing him. Would I use it, she wondered, if I came upon a band of Blue Lodge men dragging a Negro back to Missouri? And if I did, would my violence be justified to save? Or would I do as he did that day near Sentinel Hill, but for my own reasons? I don't suppose I could ever pull the trigger against anyone for any reason.

"It is really too bad," she heard St. Clair continue gravely, "that you and Jen could not live in town. It is lonely out here, and bands of men of both sides are busy in this region, robbing and burning and terrorizing."

She smiled, amused now by his rather paternal concern. "Oh, but Jen and I love it here, and would not exchange our cabin for a mansion in town! We are not afraid of the Law and Order men and we have nothing to fear from Free-Soilers."

"Nevertheless, some rough things have happened around Leavenworth lately. I hate to see you so far from neighbors and help."

"Why, where on earth do you hear about such things, Larry?" Mary put in and her tone was tart. "Down on the levee, I suppose?" She gave a little laugh, as though to pull some of the sting from her voice, but she meant it, for her protégé had been showing signs of restlessness lately, not to mention a tendency to overindulge in whisky.

Annoyance crossed his face and he frowned as he replied, "It's really not much of a laughing matter, Mary. Despite your levity,

Miss Tanner is known to be a Quaker, and to your pro-slavery friends in this area that's tantamount to being a traitor. What is worse, she is teaching for the Reverend Wills, a professed Abolitionist, and I heard it said last night at the Leavenworth House that he was a prime candidate for a coat of tar and feathers!"

Seeing that he was very much in earnest, and disconcerted by his irritation, Mary damped her own pique. "Believe me, my dear," she said turning to Phebe, "these people are *not* friends of mine! I willingly admit that I wish to see slavery extended to Kansas, as I wish to see it accepted everywhere, and certainly I have no patience with loud-mouthed Abolitionists who rant and rave over what is none of their concern. But, Larry, how very unfair to call these . . . these ruffians of the blind pigs and saloons on the levee friends of mine! Just because they are pro-slavery in sentiment does not reduce all other pro-slavery adherents to their level."

"I apologize," he replied contritely. "I meant that less categorically than it sounded. You are quite correct, for if these people were real Southerners, this whole struggle would be a limited and lawful affair. But these are not gentlemen. Far from it! They're the dregs of humanity sieved up in Missouri, Alabama, the Carolinas, even as far away as Georgia, and they mean trouble for every Free-Soil-minded man or woman they come across. *They* have no sense of chivalry and no sense of law, and it's for this reason that I wish you could be persuaded to move to town, Miss Tanner."

"You are for a free Kansas then?" Phebe asked, almost eagerly.

He smiled at the interest in her voice, and shook his head. "I don't think you'd consider me on your side either. I think the Free-Soil people as much in the wrong as their pro-slavery opposites, really. I don't think they should force the issue. I think if they could find it possible to be patient, slavery would disappear of itself in the next ten years. In the meantime, couldn't I help you find a house in Leavenworth?"

Disappointed by what she considered his equivocation, Phebe had had enough of this prying, and as civilly as she could, replied, "Thee is very good to concern thyselfes for Jen and me, but we are very happy here, and not afraid. It is well known that Quakers do not believe in violence and do not take up arms for any cause. Therefore there is little likelihood that even the most rabid of pro-slavery persons would consider us worth bothering with. Be-

sides, I have seen the Missouri Blue Lodge men in Leavenworth, I see them daily, and I must tell thee that they do not frighten me. Thee is not afraid, is thee, Jen?"

The boy shook his head and gave St. Clair a withering look. He acknowledged the young officer's charm, but felt no warmth toward him. He was too elegant, his manners too perfect, and the boy had not forgotten the incident at Sentinel Hill. Added to that, Maxwell's long, harrowing tales of adventure on the plains had been infectious, and by now, Jen liked his heroes plainly bold and brusque, and unsusceptible to feminine influence. He had mistaken his friend's awkward paralysis in his sister's presence as an attribute of manly indifference, of tolerant superiority, and his idolizing boy's gaze had seen no more than that. In contrast, St. Clair's easy manners seemed obvious weakness and worthy of contempt.

Seeing that Phebe was genuinely upset, St. Clair shook his head ruefully. "I surrender," he said soothingly. "It is none of my business and I apologize." He went on to pour a little oil on troubled waters by asking questions about the school and her conceptions of the town. Yet, even as he talked and listened, he thought uneasily of the men he had seen lately on the streets of Leavenworth, big, bearded men in red shirts and butternut trousers, with bowie knives and pistols stuck in their belts, and rifles in the scabbards of their saddles. Their talk, overheard as he passed in the streets or paused at a bar, was harsh and boastful, and all of it violently anti-Free-Soil. They came and went through the town in small mounted groups, or stood about on the wooden walks, constantly reshuffling their numbers, riding off only to return at a gallop as if not wholly certain of their purpose. They were idle for the most part, and their idleness held a threat of violence.

SEVENTEEN

Not a week later the realities of the Kansas struggle came to Phebe Tanner with the numbing shock and abruptness of an explosion. More than the incident of the free Negro, more than Rachel's whipping, this new event brought home to her the immediacy and the precarious nature of the situation, and the dark passions involved.

She arrived at the building which housed both school and law offices one sunny morning to find Mr. Wills at his usual chore of coaxing the big iron stove into life. Squat and black, it stood in the middle of the single large classroom, and as Phebe came in, its heat was already reaching the nearest benches, beyond which it would not go even by late afternoon. The dividing line between warm air and cold was almost visible, so sharply was it felt by anyone approaching or leaving the stove.

"Good morning, Miss Tanner," Mr. Wills called cheerfully, stuffing wood into the crackling belly. "Cold, isn't it?"

"Very! I'm all but frozen!" She came over to warm her hands a moment, standing well within the zone of heat, while inwardly she began the usual morning debate. Should she or should she not keep

on her uncle's old but wonderfully warm trousers, taking the risk of her pupils' ridicule, or, maintaining a ladylike dignity, remove them only to freeze all day? She had not yet been able to resolve this conflict between dignity and comfort, and in the end went off with a sigh to the small storeroom at the back of the building, where, shivering and denouncing her lack of courage, she pulled off the trousers and hung them regretfully upon their nail. She knew one settler's wife, out beyond Salt Creek, not much older than herself, who clung desperately to her skirts though she lived in a soddy. When it rained, rivulets of water and mud ran down the inside of the walls; and when it was dry, the walls themselves became clumps of powdery dust which blew off in clouds at the touch.

"I tell you, Miss Tanner," the girl had said with a half-angry, half-ironical glance around the dark hut, in which an iron stove, a bedstead, and a rocking chair were the only items of crafted furniture, all else, a table and two straight chairs, being homemade contraptions of logs and axe-squared planks, "if I ever let myself go, even a little, out here, why, I reckon that'd be the end of me! I wouldn't be no more'n a rat in a hole, no more'n some beast in his burrow, and that not even dry! Long as I can stay halfway human I got a chance, though I ain't saying I got much of one 'less it stops raining!"

Phebe smiled, remembering this pathetic courage. Beyond the door she heard the first of her pupils arrive. She could hear their young voices call back and forth, their laughter ringing clear as Rob Roy's hooves had rung upon the frozen road earlier, yet even as she placed her hand upon the wooden latch, she heard, strangely, the voice of an irate woman crying shrilly in the classroom, followed by the deeper tones of a man no less angry. Startled, she hastily opened the door to emerge upon a strange scene. Mr. Wills, a log still in his hand, was facing a dozen men and women who seemed bent upon crowding him back against the now red-hot stove. The children were sitting on their benches, staring wide-eyed at the unusual commotion.

"If I'd known your true sentiments, why, I never would have let my child set foot in this place!" one woman was crying angrily.

"My son tells me that you actually have the gall to conduct prayers . . ."

"You call yourself a man of God. Well, let me tell you, sir, nobody

who thinks as you do can be other than handyman to the Devil!"

The voices were so angry, so confused and shrill, and blended, deep male with thinner female, that it took the girl several minutes to make out what was actually being said. As for Mr. Wills, as the voices grew louder and more furious, he seemed to shrink back against the glowing stove, the log held between him and these raging people more by accident than as a weapon, while their accusations beat down upon him like driven hail.

The din increased with each passing minute until it finally brought Mr. Ellis, the lawyer occupying the offices on the second floor, to the head of the steep stairs opening into the classroom, where he stood, mouth open, eyes staring in astonishment. He collected himself at last to roar anxiously, adding to the general confusion, "What's up? What's the matter down there? What in the devil are you people doing?"

Meanwhile, hearing the uproar through the open door, men began to drift in from the street, their faces curious, then excited, as they heard the angry shouts of "Damn Abolitionist!"

"Please! Please!" Phebe heard herself pleading as she struggled to reach Mr. Wills's side. She was aghast at the way the room was filling, the way people seemed to be pouring in through the very windows, pushing the children from their benches back against the walls. Poor Mr. Wills, she thought distractedly, he'll be burnt to a cinder if he doesn't get away from that stove! Actually, an odor of singed wool was already beginning to eddy from his direction. Merciful heavens! What was the matter with these people?

Like Mr. Ellis at the head of the stairs, she felt as if her mouth were agape, and that she should be roaring her questions with the rest. Instead, she pushed and shoved determinedly through the melee.

"You ought to be tarred and feathered for teaching your evil blasphemy to the young and innocent, you damn Abolitionist!"

Phebe understood suddenly, and her confusion gave way to dismay.

The man who had bellowed this last epithet seemed to call the tune, for a number of rough-looking men who had just pushed their way inside began to call gleefully for tar and feathers. The rest soon took up the refrain, pushing and jostling each other rudely. A few parents, almost as dismayed as the Reverend Wills

and Phebe at this turn of events, tried to extricate themselves and their children as an increasing flow of men shoved in from the street. The whole scene was rapidly becoming sheer bedlam.

The children huddled, terrified, against the wall where the growing mob had heedlessly driven them, and seeing them there, all curiosity gone from their white faces, Phebe's dismay turned to abrupt indignation. Why, they had no right, no right to push in here, frightening the children like this and threatening Mr. Wills! With renewed energy she elbowed her way to his side, pushing and shoving until she reached him.

"The children!" she cried. "We must get the children out!"

He didn't seem to hear. He stood, rooted, his back almost touching the stove, his face ashen, his eyes wide and staring over the heads of the shouting mob. He seemed dumfounded. Just in front of him two men faced each other, arguing at the top of their lungs, and momentarily, at least, ignoring him. Phebe recognized one as the editor and owner of the *Leavenworth* paper; the other she was sure she had seen somewhere before, though she couldn't remember where. There was something familiar about him as he stood insolently on feet spread wide apart, his weight on his heels, his hands deep in the pockets of his short coat. This familiarity puzzled her and she paused to stare, noting vaguely from the corner of her eye that Mr. Ellis had disappeared from the top of the stairs.

"Burn it down, I say!" the man was saying. "Burn the damn roof over 'em!" He half turned, grinning, as Phebe, recalled by the stench of scorched wool, pushed Mr. Wills a step or two away from the stove. His hot black eyes touched her face and remained fixed there while the editor of the *Herald* shook his head. "No, no! We want none of that. Not here. We'll close the school and let it go at that."

"The hell with that! Burn it!" the younger man cried, raising his voice to a shout.

Behind him the pushing crowd responded with wild yells, drowning out whatever it was the *Herald* editor tried to say in reply. "Burn it! Burn it! Burn out the Abolitionists! Tar and feather that Yankee preacher, Brad. If he ain't sound on the goose let's get that tar. Come on, Bradshaw, what're we waiting for?"

The man they addressed as Bradshaw grinned, turning back toward them. He took his hands from his pockets and the crowd

hushed a little. He opened his mouth, started to speak, when into the semi-silence there came a hoarse shout from the stairs.

"All right, you down there, all of you. Out that door you came in, and hurry!"

Bradshaw spun around, and the crowd about-faced with him. On the stairs stood Mr. Ellis, his face beet-red, a Sharps carbine in his hand leveled on the mob below. There was a sudden stillness. In that stillness, Phebe plucked at the Reverend Wills's arm. At first he paid no attention but stared up, like the others, at the infuriated lawyer, but as she tugged harder, he turned his head, his eyes focusing with difficulty upon her face.

"The storeroom window . . . thee had best slip out . . . quickly!" she whispered, but to her dismay he seemed not to hear. Grimly, she caught his arm, propelling him slightly even as Ellis repeated from his position on the stairs, "Out with you, every last one of you!" He gave the carbine a menacing thrust, and every man in the crowd below him could see the whitening of his knuckle beside the trigger guard.

"Now, look here, Ellis," the *Herald* editor began, moving forward, shoving the men in front of him to one side. The entire crowd surged forward with him, then retreated as Ellis' face flamed, and he again thrust out the carbine muzzle, riveting their attention.

Phebe pushed the stricken schoolman through the storeroom door, while at the same time she motioned to the children to leave. "Run home as fast as thee can," she urged them quietly. "There will be no school today. Hurry now!" They needed no second bidding, but scuttled along the wall behind the crowd, now completely absorbed by the discussion between the shouting lawyer above their heads and their own indecisive leaders. Phebe saw the last of them run through the door before she pulled the storeroom door shut at her back. Mr. Wills, she saw at once, had come to his senses. He had the window open and was half through it, and relieved, she followed him as gracefully as she could, wishing now that she had kept her trousers on.

"Where shall I go? Where can I hide?" he cried urgently, turning to help her down.

"Let me think . . . let me think . . . Oh! Mr. Knox . . . at the store. Quickly! It's only on the next street."

As they hurried away she glanced over her shoulder, fully expect-

ing to see flames shoot up from the cottonwood shingles, but there was no sign of smoke, and even more important, no sign of pursuit. Surely, she thought, Mr. Ellis won't let them burn down the building. But she wasn't at all sure as they hurried up an alley and into the next street, where they mounted the wooden sidewalk and all but ran along in the shadows cast by the wooden store-awnings.

"Here," she said in a low voice as they reached the general store. She led the way inside, noting the slight shudder her companion gave as he took one last look back along the way they'd come. A woman was shopping at the counter, tended by Mr. Knox's grown son, Ed, but the girl paid no attention and hurried her companion on deep into the store.

"Mr. Knox?"

They found the storeman piling sacks of flour at the end of the counter. "Yes, ma'am." He looked up quizzically, having observed their strange rush through his store, but he made no comment, only straightened and regarded them good-naturedly. He was neighbor to the Tanners out the valley and he knew them well. New England was written over his tall, lean frame, stooped by years and by energetic labor, and the calm of his Yankee practicality was plain on his spare features. "Can Mr. Wills hide here?" Phebe gasped, for flight and excitement had left her breathless.

"Hide? Well, sure, I reckon if he needs to hide he can in the storeroom. Trouble, eh? Well, poor Mr. Wills been inviting trouble for some weeks now. Thought he'd likely meet it," Mr. Knox replied laconically, and leaving his flour, joined them in the depths of the store. He took a key from a hook on the wall and opened a door for them, motioning them inside. "Cold in here. Keeps the perishables. I'll rustle up a blanket or two for you, Reverend. Law and Order men, eh?"

"Yes," Mr. Wills gasped, his thin face still colorless. "I'm . . . I'm not a man of action, Mr. Knox. This kind of thing . . . this disturbs me."

"Sure, sure. Well, you stay right there, Reverend, and I guarantee nobody's going to find you."

As Mr. Knox escorted her back through the store, Phebe told him what had happened.

"I'll go back to the school and make sure everything is all right." Now that her anxiety for Mr. Knox was gone, indignation

returned in full measure, and she was furious with that seething crowd of men, idlers, and drunks from the streets, the silly, screaming women, all of them.

"Were I you," Mr. Knox put in calmly, "I'd just let that little fracas die a natural death. Likely they won't burn the building none. It don't exactly belong to Mr. Wills in the first place, and Mr. Ellis'll be dead-set against any burning and such. When they find their turkey has flown the coop, they'll simmer down and let be. Best to let Mr. Wills stay here a piece, then I'll take him out to the valley with me for a few days. They'll forget all about him by the end of the week, especially if you don't go reminding them, Miss Tanner."

She knew this as good advice but had difficulty accepting it. "Oh, those men—nothing but rough drunks! Why, they came in off the street and pushed the children around, crowding them against the wall without a care as to whether they hurt them or not! Ah, if I were a man they would not have dared."

Mr. Knox smiled. "Likely, if you were a man you'd be wearing a handsome coat of tar and feathers this minute, and the school building would be a heap of ashes," he said mildly. "It don't do none to rile these Southern folk. Anyways, I figure we have to live with 'em for a bit, so don't do no good to antagonize 'em."

"Antagonize them? Why, Mr. Knox, we were only minding our own business, tending our school, when they came bursting in with their silly goose talk and their threats. Whatever do they mean, 'sound on the goose'?" Curiosity got the better of her anger momentarily, but her eyes were still bright with excitement and her cheeks flushed from more than the whip of the November wind.

"'Sound on the goose' is a way they got of saying a man is standing right on the slavery question. If he's sound, he's for slavery in Kansas. If he ain't sound, then sooner or later they'll start calling him an Abolitionist and cooking up their tar for him. I don't know where they got such an outlandish saying, but it's the one they use, and you'll hear it aplenty in Leavenworth, not to mention if you was to go up to Kickapoo or Atchison. Like I say, though, it don't do a bit of good getting riled. As long as they feel like they do, we might's well lay low and not make more'n issue than we have to. I'm a Yankee, mind you, though I did spend a good many years in Ohio. For all that I'm a Yankee, and I feel about this

business like the rest of my kinfolk back in Vermont. Slavery ain't right and never will be, though to be honest, I got to admit to a great-uncle who was in the slave trade and made a pretty penny out of the traffic in blacks. Still, I ain't one bit for slavery. But . . . well, Miss Tanner, a Yankee's mindful of business first, politics second, and that's the only way a man can keep food in his belly and a roof over his kin."

"But does thee not get angry at all this bullying?"

"A man can stand a mite more bullying than he can bullets," he replied dryly. "Then, too, I figure one way or t'other, all this will pass. I figure slavery is dying and dying fast. The South ain't got no richer using free labor, and us Yankees been showing them the backs of our heels for some time now. I reckon them poor whites down there'll wake up and see which way the wind's blowing one of these days, and then all the shouting'll be over. Whichever way the cat jumps, a man does best keeping quiet and waiting to see where and when he can make his stand. 'Course, it's easier in a way for you, Miss Tanner. You can stand on being a woman."

Feeling rebuked, Phebe let the matter drop. After all, what he said had a familiar Quaker ring, though he was blunter than the Friends and did not bother to rationalize it in moral terms. Still, it would be a long time before she could forget Mr. Wills's ashen face as he stood backed against the stove by the shouting mob. Nor would she easily forget the narrow, black-bearded face of the man who had argued for burning the school and tarring its master. When the excitement had died, she knew why he was familiar, remembering that he was the leader of the Missouri gang at Sentinel Hill which had defied the dragoons to drag a free Negro back to slavery. It was no wonder that he seemed so much a symbol to her of the violence of the times, the crude and unreasoning lawlessness which plagued the Territory. She comprehended that there was no logic here, even though the *Herald* editor might rationalize his pro-slavery course. Here there was no conscience.

EIGHTEEN

The winter was destined to be one of the hardest in years. Early in December a bitter wind began to blow out of the Dakotas, wrapping the prairie in numbing cold and a succession of blinding blizzards. Flocks of wild turkey, prairie chicken, and quail starved to death, their bodies littering the hard crust of the snow. In Leavenworth, quail sold at twenty-five cents a dozen, and turkey was served up as long as householders could stomach it. The incipient violence of summer and late fall between Free-Soil and pro-slavery forces was cooled a bit by the violence of the weather. For several months after the abortive Wakarusa War, as the siege of the Free-Soil town of Lawrence was called, the great quarrel degenerated into the bandying of words between the newspapers representing their respective causes, the Kickapoo *Pioneer* and the Leavenworth *Herald* taking the slavery side against the *Herald of Freedom* at Lawrence. The border ruffians either stayed home in Missouri or cooled their heels in the taverns along the levee. The river was frozen, the steamboats tied up wherever the ice caught them, and there was no need for vigilance against the summer's incoming hordes of Free-State-minded squatters.

As she went back and forth from school to cabin, either mounted on Rob Roy or driving Old Maud in the springless wagon, Phebe Tanner saw these small groups of idle men coming and going in the streets, many of them drunk, whether the hour was early morning or late afternoon. She heard their harsh voices and obscene cursing, and sometimes saw blows exchanged among themselves or against a Free-Soiler accosted in the street. She read the inflammatory editorials in the Leavenworth *Herald* and followed events with an avid interest which only made her struggle against anger the harder. She found it now much too easy to understand why people fought and shed blood for a cause. The near-catastrophe at the school had aroused her indignation, while the Reverend Wills was so obsessed with the evil of slavery that he spoke of little else. Oddly enough, in spite of all that had happened, the school itself prospered, and while a few pro-slavery parents had removed their children, perversely, more border-line sympathizers had entered theirs, thus redressing and even increasing the enrollment.

Then, one night in early December, Phebe found herself completely committed in the Kansas struggle. She woke to the sound of wheels in the lane, coming from sleep with the frightened feeling of being awakened too suddenly and by a sound alien to the night. She sat up, listening, and heard the slight squealing of an axle, the clang of iron rim on stone.

A wagon? In the lane? she thought. But why? It's late . . . Uneasily, she scrambled from her bed and fumbled her way across the dark cabin to the door. She lifted the bar noiselessly, and opening the door a crack, peered out into the night.

"Pheb! Pheb, what is it?" Jen called from the loft.

"Shhhh! I don't know," she replied in a whisper just loud enough to carry to him. Outside, she heard a horse blow softly, then the sound of boots on the path leading up from the barn to the cabin. Quickly she closed the door and barred it again, and waited, her heart pounding, her mouth dry. Who on earth could it be? Raiders? Claim-jumpers? And she thought of all the stories she had heard of the raids by Law and Order men and the Blue Lodge ruffians from Missouri.

"Pheb, is someone there?" Jen hissed and she heard his bare feet thud upon the floor.

"Yes. I think so," she whispered.

"I'll get the musket, then."

"No! Thee must not take a gun to thy hand, Jen Tanner! Besides, if they are bent on mischief there will be more of them than thy one empty gun can handle. No, wait and see. . . ."

As if by way of answer a voice called hoarsely, but softly, beyond the door, "Miss Tanner? Miss Tanner!"

"Why, it's Reverend Wills!" she exclaimed, recognizing his voice at once. "Jen, light a candle quickly while I unbar the door."

A moment later he materialized in the shadowed door as Phebe pulled it open, and Jen held a candle high. "Quickly! Quickly!" Wills cried over his shoulder and ushered three muffled figures into the room. Then he closed the door hastily, leaned against it, and sighed. His companions shuffled uneasily, huddling together as the Tanners stared. What on earth? Phebe thought, dazed. Why, they were Negroes!

"Don't be alarmed," Mr. Wills said, pulling himself away from the door with an effort. "These poor people have just escaped from Missouri. They've come a long way, and it's quite cold tonight. If you could, perhaps, give them a little something to eat, something hot to drink, I think they would be very grateful." His thin face was white with fatigue and his narrow mouth grim-lipped. His voice, as he spoke, was shaking with weariness and barely audible.

Recovering from her astonishment, Phebe began to bustle about. "Of course, of course, Mr. Wills! Jen, light the fire and I will set some soup to heat. There is plenty of milk and bread . . ." She moved about her task in kindling excitement, aware of the momentousness of this visit. Was this the Underground Railroad she had heard about and Mr. Wills, strange man that he was, a conductor on that hazardous and nebulous transportation system? It seemed so odd that several times she caught herself staring at him in open curiosity.

The object of her wonder had collapsed upon the bench beside the table, his narrow shoulders slumping in an unheroic posture. "I shouldn't have brought them here," he said after a moment. "I'm sorry and I hope you'll forgive me. I have no right to endanger you and your brother, Miss Tanner, but the Law and Order patrols are on the road tonight and . . . well, I started but I wasn't sure we could get back. I'm sorry," he repeated, fatigue and fear making him a little incoherent. He was, by nature, a timid man. When

confronted by danger his inclination was to scuttle for the nearest cover, yet he heedlessly courted it from sheer lack of an elementary prudence.

"Oh, but I'm so glad that thee did stop!" Phebe declared quickly. "Thee looks far too tired to go on and it *is* dreadfully cold tonight! Besides, Jen and I are only too glad to be of help. Please, does thee not wish to come closer to the fire and warm thyself?" She turned to the three silent Negroes, who remained where they had halted just inside the door. Diffidently they moved forward, unwrapping themselves slowly, their stiffened fingers making hard work of it. As the fire caught and leapt upwards in the big rock chimney, they moved even closer, their eyes rolling. When finally they emerged from an odd assortment of outer garments, tattered blankets, shirts, caps, Phebe saw that one of them was a girl little older than herself, a slender, lithe creature, handsome in spite of a stained and shapeless calico dress. The other two were evidently a couple, the old woman the calmest of the three, while the man was all but ashen with cold and fear. Their bodies expressed abjection, although their faces held a trace of sullen defiance overlaid by an expressionless indifference. As they herded together, even pushing against each other, they seemed to cower, yet in spite of this apparent servility, they managed to hold themselves apart with the remnants of a pathetic dignity.

"Yes, we are tired, and cold," Mr. Wills replied softly, "and we're frightened, Miss Tanner. It means a pretty hideous punishment for them if they're caught, perhaps even death. It's not easy for them to run away; it takes courage. Still, if they can only get to Canada they'll be safe for the rest of their lives. The unholy Fugitive Slave Law stops at the border."

"I am very, very glad that thee thought to stop here! Thee is very brave to undertake to help them, Mr. Wills!"

He straightened a little on the bench and some of the weary sag left his shoulders, while a pleased smile trembled on his blue lips. "Why, I . . . why, I do only a little, Miss Tanner. There are many who do a great deal more."

"Ah, I only wish that I could do as much!" In spite of her genuine admiration for his zeal, she was amused at his sudden preening.

"Well, it's quite dangerous, you know. If these poor folk were found here, you would be arrested at once and tried under the new

Territorial laws. There is a large fine and possibly several years' imprisonment, not to mention," here he hesitated momentarily, "well, the judge could impose, if he wished, the death sentence; for Kansas has followed Missouri's terrible example!"

She nodded, remembering Major Arnold's cryptic words about the death penalty for all those who helped runaway slaves, which had now been extended to the Territory.

"It's worth the risk, Miss Tanner. I feel that I can only purge my own soul of this evil in our country by doing what I can for these poor folk."

"How . . . how does thee go about it? How does thee know . . . whom to help, and where?"

"Why, we're told. That is, I received a message a few days ago that these people were on their way. They were sent through Missouri and brought across the river . . . Did you know that there is a tunnel in the basement of the Planters' House which leads out to the river bank? No? Well, you are not alone. Very few people know about it. If they did, we could never bring these poor devils out of Missouri, for the river is constantly patrolled by the Blue Lodge men; they're always on the lookout for runaways. When I was told they were coming, I went, every night to the Planters' House to visit a 'friend'—never the same one—who'd taken rooms there, and one night these people came. We can never be sure just which night it will be, and sometimes we have to wait as long as a week or ten days. If the roads are closely patrolled, it is sometimes impossible for the Missouri station to send them on."

"But how did thee start in this work? Did thee ask?"

"No, I was asked. Someone approached me not long after I'd arrived in Leavenworth, last spring, in fact. I've been meaning to ask you, Miss Tanner, knowing that you and your brother are both good Quakers and very much against slavery, if . . . well, if, as tonight, when conditions endanger our going on, we could come here to hide? Our station in Leavenworth has been quite useless lately, and it's a long, long ride to Nebraska without a pause, especially since it often takes half a night to get them across the Missouri River when the patrols are out. It increases the risks . . . as well as the discomfort. . . ."

"Why, Jen and I would be only too glad to help!" Phebe cried

eagerly, for he had taken the question almost out of her mouth. "If only we could!"

"Well," he replied slowly, "I do not like to endanger you, nor to bring you trouble, but perhaps if we did not stop too often . . . it would certainly be of help . . . and would make it a great deal easier. It would be enough to know that if we found it necessary we could come here! Sometimes, the Law and Order men have patrols on every road and lane. Only last week I was stopped, but fortunately my wagon was empty and I was alone. These weren't Missouri men this time but soldiers. In fact, your friend, Major Arnold."

She was startled. "Major Arnold? But surely the army does not concern itself with fugitives?"

Mr. Wills shrugged. "Not the army as such, I suppose. Just the good major."

"Ah. I'm afraid that he is very pro-slavery. I really should have nothing more to do with them," she replied in agitation. "Yet they were so kind when Jen and I had no friends here. . . ."

"Oh, but it would be a great mistake to break off with the Arnolds!" he exclaimed. "Why, you're far less conspicuous, Miss Tanner, if it's known that you have friends at the fort! The Regulators might not watch you so closely and because of this very friendship might even discount the fact that you teach in my school. Did you know that Major Arnold was a good friend of Mr. Emory, the Regulator leader? I'm told they are often in the Star of the West together. Drinking companions, I should think." He added this last a little shyly.

"Is thee sure?" she asked doubtfully. "I've not been easy in my mind about this matter. I've been caught so long between gratitude and knowing that I should not continue this friendship that I no longer know which is right. Still, if thee thinks it might do more harm than good to break off now, why . . ."

"It would, it would! Believe me, it is better this way. You do not want to be too apparent in your convictions, Miss Tanner. For the sake of these poor fugitives, you must try to stay as unnoticed as possible."

She smiled now, thinking how odd this sounded coming from him who proclaimed his convictions at every opportunity. Still, she had to admit that she was relieved and reassured. She was eager to

help, she was excited at the prospect of giving vent to her fierce anti-slavery feelings through positive action, and she was wholly sincere in this desire. But she was also relieved that she need not renounce her friends, especially Larry St. Clair. She was not quite aware that she was asking for the best of both worlds, or that she was seeking peace of mind by offering help, but she perceived enough of her relief to feel both amused and a trifle ashamed.

When the soup had been served, and the milk and bread consumed, Mr. Wills helped settle the three fugitives in the loft. "I don't know when I'll be by for them," he said as he prepared to leave. "It will depend on the patrols. As soon as things quiet down, why, then I can move them on. I don't need to tell you not to mention this to anyone, anyone at all. Nor do I need to tell you that they must not venture from the cabin, but they know this well. Good-by. And thank you. God watch over you . . . both."

The Tanners were not quite so brave or so sanguine the next day when groups of riders passed on the road, all too obviously searching. After the first band had gone by, raising a long cloud of dust down the valley, Jen ran out to inspect the lane, and finding the marks of Mr. Wills's wagon clearly in the dirt, tried to erase them with a branch, as Maxwell had once shown him. But the lane was hard-packed, so he hitched Old Maud to their wagon and left her tied in full view near the shed.

As the days went by, the patrols increased; searchers were everywhere, and, as she went about her business in town, Phebe heard talk of runaway slaves. It was not pretty talk. It held all the violence and threat of a lynching, and it served to make her wary, and more determined than ever that the three poor souls in her loft should reach Canada safely. Even so, she could not help wondering when Mr. Wills or his confederates would relieve them of their responsibility. Each day that passed seemed longer and more fraught with strain than the day before, and she knew a real anxiety.

The wagon came finally in the middle of the night, as it had come the first time, and an unknown man received the three fugitives, leaving a note from Mr. Wills by way of explanation. When the well-bundled forms were swallowed up in darkness, and the clink and creak of the wagon faded down the lane, Phebe closed the door with a feeling of vast relief, yet the next day, found herself looking forward eagerly to receiving another runaway. She

was proud of herself, proud of Jen, and she was far more comfortable in her conscience than she'd been for many weeks. Not many Negroes were to come to the cabin, mainly because few of them had the courage to run the gauntlet of the patrols, but those who did were eagerly welcomed, and for a day or a week lay hidden in the loft, sharing Jen's bed of hay, eating greedily all that she offered, and then disappeared, as they had come, in the night at the sound of wagon wheels, a low voice calling, a special knock upon the door.

NINETEEN

Events seemed to be piling with almost frightening rapidity upon each other for both Phebe Tanner and St. Clair, and in a differing way, for Henry Arnold. The only person who seemed unchanged and unchanging was Philip Maxwell, and he kept his steady way, catching up Phebe in the mounting intensity of his courting. Where at first she had been amused and flattered, she was now frequently troubled, for she was not sure enough of her own feelings to wish to commit herself in any way. She tried to remain aloof without hurting him, she even tried to discourage him a little, but his visits to the cabin only increased. There was no mistaking his intentions and she knew that soon she would have to come to some sort of decision, yet she put it off, telling herself that she would think about it later, that she would weigh her feelings . . . later. And so he came, again and again.

It had finally become apparent to Jen that his friend was not exactly impervious to his sister's company after all. At first, he was bitterly disappointed in his hero, but after Maxwell had taken him aside for a man-to-man talk, making a full declaration of his intentions, the boy pledged his assistance whenever possible.

"Why, thee need not fret, Philip!" he exclaimed. "There is only Lieutenant St. Clair come to call, and Pheb cannot abide him because he cannot say whether he is for or against slavery. She has said so many times! She says a person must have the character to stand for what he thinks is right, and thee knows how she hates slavery!"

Maxwell was much encouraged and he was careful to make clear how much he, too, hated slavery.

To Phebe, whenever the chance presented itself, Jen extolled his friend's virtues, especially those he thought might catch her fancy, skipping over such others as how skillfully Maxwell could construct a snare for prairie rabbits or toss his bowie knife with neat precision into the center of a target marked upon a tree. "Thee should have seen Philip ride Mr. Carstair's stud this morning, Pheb! He had him quiet and gentle as a lamb within an hour, and raised no sweat on himself doing it!" Or, "Does thee like this small bench Philip made? He can make anything when he has a mind to! He takes a tool into his hand, gives it a turn here, a turn there, and it's done!"

However, sometimes they argued a little, Phebe championing St. Clair in the face of her brother's determined Maxwell-worship. She found herself instinctively comparing the two, though not aloud, taking a trait that she admired in St. Clair and which was lacking in Philip Maxwell and bringing it to the front of her own mind by chiding Jen a little, as, "If only Philip were a little less awkward!" And Jen, finding this a compliment for his hero, might nod eagerly and say, "Thee has to admit that there is nothing lah-de-dah about Philip!"

Maxwell had a staunch ally in the boy. There were few secrets of the prairie he had not taught him, and few stories of Indian warfare he had not told him. Phebe returned to the cabin many a late afternoon to find that the two had spent the whole day together, that they had resingled the shed, cut and stacked wood, or mended fence. Actually, the Tanners were far more indebted to the young soldier than they realized, and it is doubtful that without his help they could have been ready for winter, much less get through it safely. Even so, neither she nor Jen mentioned their new activity, not even when a frightened runaway crouched in the loft just above the young sergeant's head. He was, by now, an old friend, and they

were both completely at home with him, but he was in the army and the army was a great, unknown factor in Kansas, not to be wholly trusted, so they kept their secret. Besides, Mr. Wills had laid stress on the word "anyone."

Meanwhile, Mary Arnold pressed her invitations upon the girl, refusing in her turn to be put off. Phebe was heaven-sent as far as she was concerned, providing her with a continuing excuse for enjoying St. Clair's company without arousing either talk or envy. She made a great fuss over the girl, inviting her to tea and dinner, letting it be known that she did so as chaperone for the young couple, and making it clear to her friends among the officers' ladies that St. Clair was very much smitten with the Quaker maid from Philadelphia.

"They're so sweet and so shy," she might say, "though, mercy, I've never known Larry to be shy before! Ah, to be young!"

At first, Phebe had refused the invitations as firmly as she could, not wanting to return to the fort to be involved again in military social affairs. But after her talk with Mr. Wills, she began to accept, finding, with something of a shock, her old enjoyment in the pleasant evenings there. She was lonely, she was young, and she was dazzled equally by Mary Arnold and by St. Clair. Witty and charming, the former seemed by now virtually an older sister, and the girl could not help feeling flattered by her continued interest. Once, when she tried to confess her hesitancy in being caught up in a life which was the very antithesis of her own background and faith, Mary Arnold had laughed, refusing to be disturbed. "Pooh, my dear, leave the politics to the men. What do women want to mix into it for? They'll settle it in the end, and have a great deal of fun in the process by calling each other vile names! Oh, I'll own I'm all for our Southern system and I most certainly see no wrong in slavery, and I do get a bit irritated with your New England anarchists—all those Emigrant Society people—but I'm most certainly not going to lose friends over it. Not if I can help it!"

St. Clair himself was blind, still so concerned with his own worsening affairs that he was not the least aware of how and why Phebe was being used, nor that his name was being linked with hers. Nor had he any notion that he was more or less dancing attendance upon his youthful love. All his thoughts and energies were directed toward his increasing struggle to prove himself worthy

of being an officer, to maintain his position before his men and brother officers, a task which was growing more and more difficult with every passing day, as Arnold bore down harder and harder upon him. He could look back at the tarnished links of the chain forged all the way to the wide, dry-bedded branch of the Platte, and could feel that moment of judgment hovering over him. Only the habit of rationality developed in the study of law kept him from feeling shadowed by a hopeless jinx. More than once he found himself wondering what would have been the result if he'd acted differently there, if he'd had the "Charge" sounded, set spur to his horse, and mounted those rocky slopes. No doubt the main difference would have been that he'd be many months dead. But his mind, uneasy now, would not relinquish the image of other possibilities, of all things set right by a different outcome on that day.

Major Arnold, meanwhile, missed no mistake and no chance to underline that mistake before St. Clair's men. The troopers watched him commit his errors with wide and knowing grins, until the lieutenant's nerves were taut with the intuition that he would do or say the wrong thing. His command daily grew more slovenly, his men sullen and discontented, with no pride in themselves or their unit. Their mounts were badly groomed, their equipment stained and rusty, their section of the barracks untidy. Demerits mounted; there were more assignments to unpleasant housekeeping chores, more restrictions on passes, more guard duty. Odd mishaps and tragedies seemed destined to be their lot; in saber drill one man ran a comrade through the shoulder, and another was drowned in the Missouri, slipping from the back of his horse during a watering detail. The trend downhill continued, and accelerated as the weeks passed, and it seemed there was nothing St. Clair could do to alter it. Hopelessly, he turned to whisky for relief from the tensions growing in and around him. Frenetically gay, he charmed the ladies of the fort, made himself agreeable at the increasing round of social affairs, and all the while knew himself the court jester. He found his only relief in Mary's understanding and sympathy, and so, without realizing what he was doing, or why, he turned more and more to her for comfort, thereby compounding his difficulties, for Arnold could not help but see, and his own jealousy and cold resolve were fed in direct proportion.

St. Clair's immediate commander, Captain Green, was a mild

and decent man who thought he understood the situation: the lieutenant was green and untried, the older officer had selected him for toughening, and was deliberately and harshly testing him. He was well aware that all that seemed error on St. Clair's part was not his fault, but he could only understand what Arnold was doing in this other light. When he could, he interceded to gentle this rough process, acting as often as possible as a buffer between the major's brutal methods and the younger man's confusion.

"Young St. Clair's taken reveille six days in a row, Major," he might suggest tentatively, or offer the mild comment, "K Troop's mounted drill looked a bit better this morning, don't you think, sir?"

However, he was far too afraid of Arnold to take on this thankless role often or with much heart. He was sorry for St. Clair. He'd seen this process before. In fact, years ago, he'd gone through it himself and had never forgotten the experience. In his own heart he was not sure whether he'd been toughened or scarred for life, and as he watched St. Clair grow more and more uncertain and indecisive, he became convinced that the major was as likely to ruin as to mold him. He would have liked nothing better than to have had the courage to point this out to his superior, but fear held him silent. Major Arnold was not a man to be shown anything, by anyone.

Perhaps, if Mary Arnold had not been so involved in arrangements to attend the New Year's Ball at the Planters' House in Leavenworth, she might have somehow discovered her husband's intent. As it was, she found herself bewildered by St. Clair's increasing number of failures, his growing fondness for drink, and the strange, almost sullen apathy into which he sometimes sank. She thought him moody, and began to believe that he might be falling in love with her again.

Phebe, too, might have comprehended something of her friend's despair, but she had happily accepted a joint invitation from Mary and himself to the ball and had thought of nothing more serious thereafter than the dress she would wear, the way she would arrange her hair, and how and where she could obtain ribbons, lace, and gloves. Her conscience pricked her on other scores, and she was fully aware of all the weaknesses of her excuses, but she was too happy to care. She was only brought up short just before

Christmas by the realization that a ball meant dancing, and that she had never danced a step in her life.

Stricken, she confided this to Mary, who was horrified. "What, can't dance? For mercy's sake, Phebe! Have you never attended a ball before?"

"No," she replied, shamed. "Thee forgets, I'm a Quaker and the Quakers do not hold with dancing. *I* seem to have forgotten, too." The radiant vision of herself on St. Clair's arm, which had sustained her for days in a state of entrancement, vanished, leaving a dismal image of herself tripping and stumbling clumsily about, or worse, spending the entire time rigidly along the wall.

"Never mind, my dear," Mary put in quickly, seeing the disappointment in her face. "You are pretty enough that it would not matter, except that your pleasure might be marred. Why don't we ask Harry to come to the rescue and teach you? A week will be sufficient, and he is an excellent dancer, almost as good as Larry. He wouldn't mind a bit," she continued, noticing that the girl hesitated. "In fact, he'd be very pleased!"

The imagined glory of her dream proved too powerful, and though she had misgivings, Phebe assented and the matter was quickly arranged. Major Arnold did seem pleased with his assignment and put himself out to be agreeable.

"I will do my very best to be a good teacher," he said with a smile. "I suppose one must put one's best foot forward when teaching the teacher, eh?"

At first Phebe was miserable, and wished her love of pleasure had never lured her into this predicament. She hated to be held in the dapper major's arms; it made her stiff and awkward and she committed one blunder after another. Even though he was remarkably patient and encouraging, she was sure she could never learn. Then, too, she could not help withdrawing from him—put off by his mocking manner, his intense, patronizing stare, his disconcerting way of speaking with abrupt breaks and changes.

"You are quite happy here now?" he would begin, almost always carrying on in a series of questions. "Leavenworth is not such a bad town then? A little wild, perhaps, but that's to be expected of a border town, don't you think? The fort offers enough to make your life gay and occupied? I see you often with young St. Clair, do I

not? A fine young man, very good family. Did you know that he and Mary grew up together?"

Yes, she was very happy; the town *was* a bit wild; yes, she was occupied; and yes, Mary had told her so; and thus she would try to keep up her end of this disjointed chat while she concentrated on her feet, on trying to relax, and on not disliking him so. If she had realized that it had not even occurred to him to taunt her Quaker sentiments, her aversion might have been more easily tempered. Intrigued by her calm and youth, he denied himself the pleasure of baiting her, and put himself out instead to entertain, telling her stories of the border and of Indian wars, much as Philip Maxwell had done.

"Did you notice the sunsets we had for several weeks this fall? Did anyone tell you that their magnificence was due to the prairie fires to the west? Several years ago I had a troop out chasing a local Pawnee chief who'd run off with some of our mules, drove them off right under our noses so to speak, and we were just closing with 'em when we ran into one of these fires. The wind was very strong and pushing the fire directly toward us, so there was nothing for it but to turn tail and run. We rode southward, trying to get around the flank of the thing, which seemed to pick up speed with every minute. Can you imagine the confusion? A troop of dragoons mixed with at least a thousand stampeding buffalo, not to mention hundreds of elk and deer and literally thousands of smaller game, rabbits, coyotes, prairie chicken . . . all rushing headlong, and every last one of 'em with the same idea . . . cut southward around the flank! Then imagine my surprise when I looked up to find the Pawnee chief I was chasing beating his horse alongside mine, riding for his life just as I was. He saw me at about the same time, but needless to say, we did no more than exchange glances and whip up our horses the harder. He had no stomach at that moment for my scalp, nor I for his."

"And you all escaped?" she asked, amused to find herself so breathless.

He nodded, smiling, and touched his chest. "Behold the living proof."

"And the Pawnee chief?"

"Ah, yes. Well, when we'd all flanked the fire and disentangled ourselves from the wildlife, the chase was on again. I had the good

luck to find the bugler almost at once, he blew 'Assembly,' and we were off. The chief served two months in the stockade and paid a few skins for the mules. I heard, only a year ago, that he was busy stealing horses from settlers beyond Council Grove."

More seriously, he added, "There's two kinds of people who come to the border, Miss Tanner. There's those who can't make do where they are, so they pack up what little they've got, and to save their pride, move on. Then there's the others, like myself. We're the natural loners; we can't mix with the mass of people and we know it, so we play another game and either make our fame, if not our fortune, in this more lonely land, or are buried without a whisper somewhere."

In the end, her antipathy created its own compassion for this strange little man. Her increasing sympathy for him puzzled her. For a while she thought that perhaps she was only practicing the old tenets of forgiveness, but later she decided that it was because he seemed possessed by two natures, and was caught between them in a bitter and unending struggle. For this she could well feel compassion, finding herself so often at war.

As for the dancing, the lessons progressed and she had to admit that he was, indeed, an excellent instructor. Before long she found herself dancing as if she had danced for years, and actually enjoying it. After a dozen sessions, Mary pronounced her accomplished enough for any ballroom, and she realized, not without a momentary distress, that she had taken one more step away from her faith.

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TWENTY

The kettles of fat pork were empty, the wooden plates of bread cleaned of the last dry slice, and the kegs of Christmas grog divided and swiftly downed, until the two big barracks echoed with the snores, groans, shouts, and jests of a thousand celebrating dragoons. Not that they had much to celebrate. Certainly not the eight dollars a month in pay; not the meals of pork head or boiled buffalo beef, hard bread, coffee, and a swig of vinegar to ward off the ever-present scurvy; not the beds of board and a sack filled once a month with prairie hay, and the two rough, drab wool blankets; not the monotony of the garrison days, beginning at dawn or before with stable duty, and ending after dark with the same; not the pleasures of bad whisky in Weston across the river, or the questionable embraces of the whores on Water Street in Leavenworth. Not much to celebrate, but then, perhaps, it was enough just to be alive, to have one's scalp still tightly in place, to be full of warm and greasy pork and raw rum, to be young and a man!

"Christmas, and look how goddam close they are with the rum!"

"My God, what d'ya call it with passes? Who got 'em?"

"The noncoms, every last one of 'em! Christ on a cross, if they didn't!"

"Why, I reckon you ain't got a pass, friend, because they want to keep the town safe from the dirty likes of you! You ain't nothing but a filthy Indian-fighter, and you ain't fitten company for women and children, now are you, mister?"

"My ma used to make the best suet pudding this side of the Atlantic come every Christmas."

"My ma made a pie, big one, damn near two feet across. Oncet a year she made a pie."

"If I could get over to Weston I'd give me a bottle of rotgut for Christmas!"

"Yeah, and drink it like a pig, you would!"

"How come they penned us horse-soldiers? How come there ain't no passes?"

"Because you're K Troop, soldier, because you're a goddam foulup K Troop dragoon, don't know left from right and column of fours from a column of twos! And we gotta suck your dust!"

"Nothing but clowns, that K Troop."

"Mister, step right out here and I'll show you where the clowns are!"

"Whole damn troop, nothing but clowns!"

"Lieutenant St. Clown, head of the clown platoon!"

"Outside! Outside! God damn it, outside!"

Half a dozen tables went over with a crash as the mass of men clashed together, then moved in a struggling rush for the doors. Shouting, cursing, hitting out wildly at each other, they erupted from the building, some of them jumping through the windows to get out the faster and into the fight. A hundred or more men began systematically to knock each other insensible. Fists thudded into flesh, bodies collided hard, howls of rage and pain filled the cold night.

"Corporal of the guard! Corporal of the guard!"

Armed men came running, using the butts of their carbines to fight their way through the densely packed onlookers, who by this time had formed a solid wall around the shifting struggle.

"Break it up!"

"Attention! Attention!"

St. Clair, walking slowly and with great care across the snowy,

shadowed patchwork of the Main Parade to his quarters in Bedlam, heard the racket but paid no heed. He wanted his bed, he wanted to shield and protect his euphoric mood until it could carry him safely into sleep, and he continued his cautious way without even turning his head. He was almost certain that if he could cherish the warm afterglow of whisky long enough to gain his quarters he would sleep this night.

"Larry! Larry, wait!" Lieutenant Price ran across the snow, his boots slipping in his haste. Panting, he caught his friend by the arm, halting him abruptly. "You can't go off like that, Larry! What the hell, that's your troop over there tangling with G Troop! You'd better look into it before it brings the general out, not to mention Major Arnold!"

St. Clair turned and looked vaguely toward the barracks. He studied the dark knot of men moving back and forth across the snow with each shift of the melee at their core, then shrugged. A shout went up as two men were pitched through the windows to land sprawling in the snow. Officers began to appear on the porches of their quarters, drawn by the noise, and at headquarters lamps were lit. Dragoons were still pouring from the other barracks to join the throng of spectators, and in one way or another the entire fort was swiftly being involved.

"What you want, Bill?" St. Clair mumbled, turning away. "Let Green look to it, or Allison or somebody . . ." He started to move away, but Price caught his arm again.

"Look, Larry, this isn't Green's concern, or anybody else's, it's yours. You've got to get over there. I came by that mess close enough to hear what they're yelling at each other, and I'm telling you this is your fight and your chance to knock some sense into that outfit of yours. I wouldn't have run like a fool after you if I didn't think it was important for you to get in there and break it up before anyone else does! It's your lookout, Larry, believe me!"

St. Clair stared at him blankly, the fingers of one hand twisting the gold buttons of his jacket. "Over there?" he asked thickly, pointing with the other hand, reluctantly relinquishing his fragile mood.

Price nodded, peering at him doubtfully, arrested by the muted thick tones of his friend's voice. Was he that drunk?

"Oh, over there, eh? My outfit? Well, thanks, Bill, thanks a lot,"

and he began to move slowly, uncertainly, toward the crowd while his friend stood watching in growing uneasiness. Should I follow him? Price wondered. Is he likely to make matters worse? No, better to let him go. He's got to show those damned idiots! He's got to, or he's through.

While he stood indecisive, St. Clair came closer to the mob and stopped suddenly as the content of their shouts and jibes began to penetrate his dazed mind. His face tightened, and he felt the familiar sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach.

"Gently, gently, gentleman!" a burly old sergeant shouted from the sidelines. "Ain't you troopers in K from the deah old South, now? And ain't this a disgrace to your mammies, boys? I thought you boys in K never did get your noses bloodied, nor nothing else neither!"

"I ain't from the South!" screamed an enraged young trooper with unruly blond hair as he emerged momentarily from the milling fighters. "God damn you, I ain't no nigger-keeper and no bastard with stripes is gonna say I am!"

"You're from K Troop, ain't you?" a dozen men chorused, moving in on him. "Ain't you, mister? Ain't you a show-me-the-way-back trooper from K?" One big soldier, twice the youngster's size, brought his fist down on his neck, and the blond head was swallowed abruptly in the black, struggling mass.

Years ago, an older boy had once waited for St. Clair on his way to his tutor's, and his friends, knowing it, had generously warned him, then trailed him every step of the way to see the fun. He could remember the inexorableness of that time and the avid faces of the boys at his back, and as he stood hesitating in the snow he relived the same feeling of unreasonable compulsion. He could not scream or run, or slink away. He had to move forward toward the thing that would hurt; he could remember vividly the drag of his body against each forward step, the terrible pounding of his heart, the sick churning of his stomach. I was afraid, he thought, and I'm afraid now. All my life I've been afraid. . . .

"Larry!" Price came up quickly, making him jump. "Larry, are you drunk?"

He turned his head in the darkness and grinned. "Sure, Bill. Very drunk. Listen to those bastards, will you? 'St. Clown's troopers!

The show-me-the-way-back boys! Your pa in the War Department, sonny?' Listen to 'em, Bill!"

"Look here, Larry, every officer in the damn fort will be over here in a minute. If you're going to make your move, make it and damn quick!" Price said, suddenly disgusted.

"Sure, sure, right away, Bill. Give me time, a little time. I'll go in and break it up, take my good right arm and make 'em behave! Nothing to it," he replied, not moving, remembering the bright eyes of the small boys trailing him.

Price looked at him a moment coldly, then turned his back and walked away. St. Clair stared at his retreating back, then sighed, pulled his saber from the scabbard, straightened his jacket, clapped his shako more firmly upon his head, and advanced, saber raised. An image of himself, as all the things he never was but had always wanted so desperately to be, made him laugh suddenly, and was followed by a maturer vision of himself, dusty, weary, the leader of a small group of dirty men far out in the middle of nowhere. No, no hero he! No fancy officer in full dress sitting a big, well-built charger and leading off a column of straight and sturdy dragoons! It had not happened that way; it never would. Yet, in that maturer vision he reached a degree of insight that had, so far, eluded him. He was afraid, yes; he always had been, and in all probability, he always would be in moments of personal danger. But fear and cowardice were not necessarily synonymous, and he was not a coward. Knowing this at last, he walked on across the snow and into the fringe of watching soldiers, impelled by much the same compulsion which had led him, years before, into the bully's lair.

"Attention!" he heard himself shouting. "Attention!"

He flailed about him among the belligerents, using the flat of his saber as hard as he dared, swinging his body lithely, putting shoulder and arm into the action, and to his astonishment, slowly cleared a path among the men. In confusion they fell back, while he, his fear engulfed in exertion, moved forward. He no longer cared. Even when someone snatched his saber from his hand, wrenching his wrist badly in the guard, even when he heard the snap of shivered steel and saw the bright pieces of his weapon flung into the snow in the uncertain light, and even when he went down to his knees, struck or pushed deliberately from behind, he did not

care. And unlike the incident of years ago, his beating now was brief.

"Stand back, God damn it! Stand back! That's an officer, you damn fools! Can you get up, sir?"

He looked up to see Philip Maxwell standing over him, one fist cocked belligerently while he reached down with his free hand, grabbing St. Clair's epaulet and hauling him bodily to his feet. "You hurt, sir?" He looked as if he could not quite believe what he saw.

Dazed, St. Clair shook his head. Two hefty noncoms standing beside Maxwell surveyed his dishevelment with broad grins. Beyond this small and silent circle, occupying all of St. Clair's numb and careful attention, soldiers of the guard began the methodical business of cracking skulls with their carbines and of hauling protesting spectators and sullen fighters alike to the guardhouse.

"The major over yonder wants to see you, sir," Maxwell said carefully.

St. Clair nodded, but did not move, nor did he seem to have any intention of moving. He stood, still dazed, then stooped to pick up the broken stump of his saber. Vaguely he wondered if he could consider that he had atoned now for the mangled bodies lashed to a frightened horse. He doubted it. He doubted that he ever could and he wasn't sure that it was worth the effort, for every attempt he made turned into disaster. Even so, he felt certain now that he had not reached that decision that day out of fear.

By the barracks, officers and noncoms were lining the dragoons into formations, their shouted orders like the bellows of wounded bulls in the clear, cold night. Overheated bodies were chilling quickly, and tempers roused to the glory of battle were cooling to weariness and dismay as the roll was called for a second time, and then a third. The peace of Christmas returned gradually to the fort, officers went back to their warm quarters, women stepped in from their verandas, discarding their shawls, and in the end, the noncoms double-quickened the men around the Main Parade and, finally satisfied of their complete dejection, dismissed them.

St. Clair, his uniform wet with snow and mud, his broken saber still in his hand, reported to Arnold and stood at attention, listening to the familiar and damning voice coldly pronouncing yet

another sentence of displeasure. He had reached the bottom, he had tasted the dregs, and yet . . . and yet . . .

"If you'd used that saber to draw a little blood, Lieutenant, you'd have saved making such a spectacle of yourself!"

No, he thought dully, that has nothing to do with it, and he straightened a little, looking at Arnold more closely, curiously. Did he really think that to draw blood was the answer for a man's lost pride? Was this the only solution this strange man knew? He tried to think, urged on by a vague need to pursue this dim and new conception of the man, but he was too tired, too numb. He could feel little of anything—shame, embarrassment, anger—they all escaped him, and he sank with relief into a lethargy of indifference. Come what may, it was all out of his hands. He had done all he could. He had only failed again.

Yet, odd as it might have sounded to him if someone had said it then, this was the turning point. He had reached bottom, there he had found a measure of self-comprehension, and now there was nowhere else for him to go but up. His drunken march into the mob of battling dragoons who had howled his name in derision, to lay about him with the flat of his saber in a not too rational effort to restore order and his own authority, had been the first step toward regained pride. Even his friend Price, watching him, had found a measure of his faith restored, while Arnold, some distance away, had been a little shocked. Only a fool would walk into the middle of a drunken brawl!

St. Clair, having acknowledged fear, realized some of this, but in the aftermath of fatigue he could see only the sorry spectacle of himself sprawling in the snow and mud, his broken saber, like a symbol, in a dozen pieces around him. It would take time.

TWENTY-ONE

The four-story Planters' House was ablaze. Light poured out upon the verandas fronting the river and glittered upon the new-fallen snow heaped upon the window sills. Inside, black-walnut molding and carved stair rails shone liquidly with polish, and the marble floors formed a striking contrast with the dark, silken wood. In the great dining hall, with its gay ceiling murals and its silver service brought down from New York, laughter, music, and voices blended in a pleasant uproar. Through it, colored waiters scurried to keep the punch bowls filled, the guests supplied. Downstairs at the bar, diplomatically served by two barkeeps, one with known pro-slavery tendencies and one with Free-State, unaccompanied gentlemen drank the old year out, the new year in.

In this fairy world Phebe was living her hour of pleasure. She did not notice that a great many gentlemen were very drunk, a good many ladies overbold. Even if she had seen these things, she would not have understood them, just as, if she'd been able to step outside her lithe white-gowned body, she would not have recognized herself. Excitement and happiness had made her very gay, sharpening her wit and heightening her already lovely coloring so that many

an eye turned her way. She was like the proverbial caterpillar come out a butterfly, and she shared that insect's probable astonishment in itself.

She danced and laughed and coquetted mildly, enjoying her bright hour until it suddenly went wrong. The shadow began its slow encroachment of her happiness when she overheard a fragment of conversation near the punch bowl. A large, stout man with gray mustaches leaned his head close to a lean, sour young man, and shouted over the gay chatter all around him, "Ought to be burned clean out of the Territory! Every last damn nigger-lover amongst 'em! I ain't for bloodshed, but by God, they need hanging!"

"Be best," the younger man replied in a milder tone. "Be best to keep the tar hot and the feathers handy. Taught that Reverend over to Atchison a lesson when they fixed him like a turkey and set him adrift in the Missouri. Ain't no lesson like it for making 'em git and run!"

Only a few words imperfectly heard, yet a breach was made in her glittering dream, and as if to complete its rout, the events following built one upon the other until the whole fell down in ruins, and by the time the evening ended she could have wept with shame and anger.

The music started again and she was swept away from the stout man's bellow and the sullen one's reply on the arm of a dark-haired captain. She almost forgot the words she'd overheard as she wondered dizzily how her partner managed his long saber, and what was keeping them from being tripped up and thrown to the floor to be trampled by the whirling couples all around them.

"Where you from, Miss Tanner?" the captain was asking as she dreamily imagined the scene if she were to be tumbled by a sword.

"From? Does thee mean originally?"

"Yes. I already know that you live near Leavenworth and that you are a schoolmarm there. I asked, you see. And out of a very real desire to know."

She laughed. "Be careful or someone will think that thee is a Pinkerton man on the trail of a jewel thief or an heiress! Why, I'm from Pennsylvania, Captain Darby, although it's been so long since I thought of myself as an Easterner that I hardly know what to answer to that question any more."

"That's true of just about everyone on the border, ma'am," he

replied with a smile. "We're all from somewhere else, and yet we're not. So you're a Yankee! Not a fire-eating Abolitionist, I hope?"

She frowned and stiffened slightly, replying in a cooler voice, "And if I were?"

He shook his head ruefully. "Kansas is getting so overrun with 'em, I should hate to find the prettiest girl in the Territory is a member of the band!"

"Thee must know that I'm a Quaker and so cannot favor slavery, Captain. Nor would I if I were not of Quaker faith. Still, if thee means by fire-eating that I favor violence, thee need not fret. I carry no Beecher's Bible!"

He noticed the coolness in her voice then and was instantly contrite. "Forgive me, Miss Tanner. I did not mean to cause offense. We're so used to taking sides here that if we're not actually fighting over the matter, then we jest about it. Perhaps, in the end, that is the sanest way. . . ."

She relented. "Thee is right. I am overly sensitive. Oh, how I wish there were none of this trouble, or barring that, that we need never speak of it, especially on such a wonderful evening!"

"I am truly sorry. Please forgive me." His arm tightened on her waist as he whirled her to the dipping strains of the waltz. "You know, between the Indians in the West and the politicians in the East, we border people are caught in a squeeze. But I will not talk of politics. Still, the weather doesn't offer much, does it? And even now the music is ending and my golden opportunity is gone. Ah, good evening, Major Arnold."

"'Evening, Darby. Hello, Phebe. My dance, isn't it?"

She consulted her small programme with a sinking heart. Yes, there was his name, scrawled in big, bold letters. Well . . . but surely I'm not ungrateful, she thought, touched by shame to feel this slight hint of revulsion.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked as he swung her off with the renewed music. "I really do not need to ask, for I've been watching. You are queen of this night and I must say you've had a steady stream of admirers, haven't you? Was the handsome lieutenant surprised? But of course not. We didn't let him in on the secret, did we, and he could be none the wiser? I'd forgotten."

"No, we didn't," she murmured. "I'd have been mortified to have him guess."

He laughed, and there was a malicious sparkle in his dark eyes. "Of course, of course."

Phebe shivered a little and was suddenly aware that she was as tall as he, almost taller in her ballroom slippers, and the knowledge made her self-conscious. She made an awkward movement, losing the beat of the music momentarily. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said quickly, and could have bitten off her tongue, remembering Mary's cool cautioning, "Never apologize to the gentleman. It's always, as a matter of chivalry, assumed to be his fault." She blushed, feeling that indefinable sense of awkwardness that he alone seemed capable of making her feel.

However, he only smiled at her, replying gently, "Now, now, my dear, I was far too busy talking. But tell me, why were you frowning at Captain Darby? Was he rude?"

"Oh, no! We were . . . well, I suppose thee might say we were arguing. If I frowned I did not know it."

"Arguing? But what on earth about? Is there anything about which a young gentleman and a pretty girl can argue?"

Oh, dear, she thought, feeling uncomfortable again, now what shall I say? How stupid of me not to have fibbed a little! She did not want to quarrel with him, for she was grateful to him, not only because he had helped her out of her foolish predicament, but also because he had been kind when she had expected . . . ugliness. Vaguely as she could, she replied, "Oh, the usual thing that everybody argues about these days . . . thee knows, politics."

"Politics! But, Phebe, what do you know of politics?" He held her at arm's length and stared at her in astonishment.

Stung, she forgot her resolve to avoid controversy and retorted, "It is very difficult for anyone, except perhaps a babe in arms or an utter idiot, not to know of politics these days, Major. And I suppose, like everyone else, I have my own notions of what is right and wrong here in the Territory!"

"Right and wrong?" His astonishment gave way to the mockery she disliked so much, and he smiled. As though to pacify a child, she thought, nettled. "Right and wrong? Do you mean by that the slavery question? Surely, it is nothing so drastic. It is only a question of property on the one side and of simply minding one's business on the other."

"That may be thy view of the matter," she replied stubbornly,

even though she wished the whole discussion ended. "The other view is one of Christian morality. I would go so far as to say . . . of good and evil."

"Morality? Good and evil?" He laughed delightedly. "Ah, Phebe, you have fallen for the golden tones of Mr. Beecher with all the other ladies! What a persuasive gentleman he must be!"

"I know nothing of Mr. Beecher," she cried, "except that I do not hold with his policy of sending his so-called 'Bibles' to Kansas. I do not hold with teaching the blind with bayonets! To learn and to teach the charity of Christianity I am sure one must first practice it, but if he says slavery is evil, then I understand him!"

His amusement died and he replied coolly, "You are very harsh on us slaveholders. Isn't it rather a blanket indictment to accuse us of unchristian behavior? Some of us are Yankees, you know. I, myself, am from New York State."

"I'm not nearly harsh enough!" she cried, returning his steady gaze, her blue eyes bright with anger. "That a slaveholder may be a Yankee makes no difference. It makes no difference who or what the owner might be; the human being is still no chattel. He is a creature of God and born free as such, whether it be on a river bank in Africa or in a cabin in our South. That thee comes from New York does not affect the fact that for thee to enslave another is wrong, and the law that allows it is an evil law. If thee were a slave, Major, thee might feel quite differently about the institution!" Having delivered herself, she waited, holding her breath and inwardly quailing, knowing that she had said too much, and knowing his uncertain temper well.

The music came to a halt, and he brought her around in one last, sedate circle, then released her, and for a moment regarded her silently. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet. "Yes, Phebe, I might, if I were a slave. I might feel differently about many things if I were an Indian and my land and game were being taken. I might feel differently if I were anyone but myself. A thousand things might have been different . . . if—if my life had not been so hard when I was young, if my mother had not died when I was barely born, if my father had not drunk himself to death in cheap wine, leaving me to a squalor you can scarcely imagine, if I had had anyone ever to care whether I lived or died. No, my dear, we cannot change the world from another's viewpoint, only from our own, and

it does not do for men as precariously situated as myself to try. I will leave you the morality of the question; it cannot concern me any longer. But let us change the subject and speak of pleasanter things. Does it not please you to be the belle of the ball tonight? The prettiest young lady in Leavenworth, with dozens of young officers and civilians dancing attendance?" The somberness had gone out of his voice, and a bit of the old mockery returned. She flushed, unable to relinquish her indignation so easily.

"No, for I have not thought about it," she replied curtly, then blushed the harder, knowing her lie, feeling again the soft wrappings of her golden dream and seeing, with shy self-consciousness, the image she had painted of herself this night.

He smiled. "Ah, but you . . ."

"Pardon me, sir . . . I believe this next is my dance. . . ?"

St. Clair came up just then to claim his dance, voicing that claim with an odd diffidence which, ordinarily, Phebe would have noticed. However, mingled regret and relief—regret because the moment had passed before her very natural feminine curiosity had been satisfied, and relief because she could think of no adequate reply—clouded her attention. Arnold's had been an extraordinary confession, and she knew it. Why he had made it she could not fathom, but having made it, he had placed upon her the burden of obligation; he had moved himself decisively into her thoughts, and with a shrewdness beyond her years and experience she was fleetingly aware that this might have been his deliberate intention. She would have liked to hear what else he might have said, for to her, as to many others, Major Arnold was an enigma. Why was he so strange and cold? Why never at ease? Why had he to guard himself so?

She was so absorbed in her musings that for the moment she paid scant attention to her partner. She had not heard of the riot on Christmas Eve at the fort, nor of his part in it, and she had completely missed his constraint of a moment ago and the major's thin, answering smile. But she was all attention when St. Clair said, "Hello, Phebe. I've been waiting a long time for this chance to tell you how pretty you look tonight!"

She blushed, forgetting Arnold, politics, slavery. "Thee is nice to tell me so," she murmured. She looked up into his face and was abruptly shocked. He was very pale, the dark tan of summer turned

an ashen gray, dark shadows underlying his clear gray eyes. There was a strange listlessness about both face and eyes that dismayed her. His usually gay voice seemed dull and a little thick, as though he spoke with effort. She remembered at once the night he had returned from his interview with the general, for he showed the same stunned apathy now. But that was all settled, she thought numbly.

"No," he was saying dispiritedly, "there's nothing especially nice about speaking the truth. Surely you've had this said to you a dozen times tonight, not to mention during your Philadelphia Assemblies!"

Her color heightened and she laughed uneasily, her other anxiety momentarily forgotten. "No, Larry, I must confess that until only a few weeks ago I'd never danced a step. Major Arnold was good enough to teach me for just this occasion, and it . . ."

"Major Arnold?" His brows drew together slightly in a puzzled frown, and there was an edge of disbelief and of something else, perhaps distaste, in his voice.

"Yes. I thought it very kind of him. I . . . we . . . it was supposed to have been a secret, at least from thee, for I was . . . well . . . shamed by my lack of knowledge, but when thee says . . ." She stopped in confusion.

He laughed. "Why, Phebe, it's getting very difficult to remember that you are a Quaker maid!" He tried to jest, to speak lightly, but lightness had so far deserted him that he could not keep the bleakness from his voice. It sounded almost like an accusation, and she was stricken. It seemed to her the last blow in a conspiracy to burst the bubble of her pleasure.

"That is not much to my credit," she murmured uneasily, wondering in an almost childish way if God wasn't punishing her with painful pricks to her already raw conscience. If she had been reared within a more narrow faith and a stricter morality, she would not have suffered this confusion. As it was, she could remember far too vividly that her uncle had often said that her own parents were more worldly in outlook than was considered proper. Often, too, he had censured her—mildly—for her affinity for music and laughter and dancing. Music and laughter and dancing! And all I have done is to excuse myself, she thought penitently. Over and over, from the very first, when I allowed myself to be drawn into the comfort and pleasure of Mary's home, and not one of these excuses has been any

stronger than my own weak will! Nor is it any better that I have helped a handful of slaves escape, for in my heart I know I love this other world too well!

Her uncle's sonorous voice was like an old bell tolling through memory. "That is what the human conscience is for, my dear. It tells thee very clearly what is evil for thee so that thee may take thy stand against it. It is when thee tries to rationalize that thee makes difficulties for thyself." Ah, she thought sadly, I cannot excuse myself endlessly. I must call a halt now and take my stand. I am too much half this and half that.

Aloud, and defiantly, she said, "Thee is right! I have forgotten myself and I have paid little heed to my faith. I am not like thee, who can see so clearly all the right and the wrong of both sides of a question and therefore need not decide which of the two is least evil."

"No, no," he protested unhappily, "I didn't mean it in that fashion. As for me, I am only blind." He sighed. "Please don't misunderstand me, Phebe. I remember how Maxwell and I found you out there on the prairie, and now here you are, the belle of the ball. The contrast is so marked that I could not help trying to jest a little."

"Yes," she replied soberly, "thee is right. I may not be the belle of the ball, for thee flatters me, but I am at the ball and I should not be. It is strange. It sounds so simple and seems so clear, yet I did not find it so easy to understand a few minutes ago."

"Please, Phebe, I did not mean to upset you. Would it really make you happier, then, to be at McCracken's tonight rather than here?"

"McCracken's? The hotel, does thee mean?" she asked, puzzled.

"Yes. At their New Year's Ball."

"But why should I be happier there?"

"Well, they're all more or less Free-Soil in sentiment," he replied slowly, hesitating, aware suddenly that he was not making things any better, only worse.

"Is thee saying that the Free-Soil people are holding their celebration separately at McCracken's?"

He nodded ruefully. "Yes, and I'm certain that I should have left all this unsaid. The whole thing is really ridiculous when you think about it. . . ."

"Does thee mean that I am attending a pro-slavery ball?" she demanded.

"Well, more or less," he replied soothingly, "although not everyone here is pro-slavery by any means. I think the whole situation came about because one side announced that it would have a gala party and the other felt it could do no less. Fortunately the town is between them!" And amused by the image of the two sides warring over their punch tables and their dance floors, he injudiciously laughed.

Perhaps, if her conscience had been clear, his laughter might not have hurt so, but because she knew her own indecision and felt guilt for her confusion, she was speechless. Then, too, she was far more disappointed by his indifference and refusal to be aroused by either side than he could possibly know. She guessed nothing of his own problems. She could not comprehend his tolerance, which seemed more vacillation than tolerance, more insensibility than a differing belief. She soon recovered herself, flaring up angrily like a Roman candle, her dark-blue eyes flashing, and under the impact of pent-up indignation, her voice trembled as she cried, "It may amuse thee, but I cannot laugh! I have made a terrible mistake coming here tonight, and I have no one to blame but myself for my lack of conviction. I have let myself be confused by kindness and lulled by pleasure. Yet, not a month ago, a group of people who are, no doubt, every bit as charming and delightful in polite society as these here tonight, drove us out of the school, threatening Mr. Wills with tar and feathers and all but burning the roof over our heads! What am I to think? That the people here who think as they do about slavery will always be so pleasant and kind? Or will they force me to jump through a back window and flee as I did a few weeks ago?"

"What? Who were these people?" he cried, concerned, roused a little from his apathy by her agitation and by a sudden anxiety for her welfare.

"Oh, mercy, anyone and everyone who so ardently wishes to extend slavery into Kansas that they do not care what they do to carry out their desires! Good people, I suppose. Some were parents of my pupils, but the worst of all were the Missouri ruffians. It does not really matter. It does not matter that *thee* cannot save a Negro from being dragged back to slavery; it does not matter that my friends

publicly whip their slaves; it only matters that I allow myself to be a party to it. Slavery is shameful, and violence is shameful, and I hate them both with all my heart, but I believe now that I would as soon condone violence to do away with slavery as to see this land so divided and set upon!"

He stared at her in astonishment, his gray eyes darkening, a frown creasing his forehead, but he tried to speak calmly, although he felt a very real apprehension on her account. "Well, don't you think that time may take care of this whole question, that given a little peace and quiet, men will come to a reasonable and peaceful conclusion? Perhaps, in five years or so . . ."

"Five years!" she exclaimed, her indignation increasing rather than diminishing. "Five years! Has thee never thought what it must be like to be owned body and soul by a master, to have thy family ties broken at his whim, to be sold away from thy mother before properly grown? Ah, have mercy on them! Though their skins be black, they have just one life, even as thee and I, and each hour and day and month is as important to them as it is to us. They have the right to dignity and to joy even as thee, and it is evil, *evil*, does thee hear, to rob them so! I cannot see how people can be so blind to simple humanity! They believe themselves good Christians, the Arnolds and all their like, yet without pain to their conscience they proclaim themselves superior to millions, and that these others they call inferior are only good enough to be their slaves. 'Love thy neighbor' flies from their morality, and lip service is all they give to their God! And thee, cannot thee make up thy mind for anything?" She paused for breath, oblivious to the heads that turned, the interested stares.

"I don't know," he replied quietly. "I said that I was blind, and I am. I agree with all you say, but still, I don't know. The problem of good and evil is complicated by men's emotions, by rigid and dogmatic stands for one against the other, though I doubt that there is ever purity on either side. And then come the circles within circles. In the South, slavery is a matter of property, and therefore, though we may morally disagree with such an outlook, I think we'd probably have a better chance of eradicating it by looking at it in the same light as they do, and treating it accordingly. Property has value, and if you wish to obtain that property, even to set it free, you must pay its value."

"That is where thee and Philip disagree. He would say that moral principles come first, money values second," she replied coldly, feeling beneath her anger the conviction that he had somehow failed her.

"Philip?" he asked, entirely diverted.

"Sergeant Maxwell. Thee knows he is anti-slavery, doesn't thee? *He* at least has made his stand!"

"Oh." He fell silent for a moment, then asked carefully, "Do you see him often, Phebe?" He waited a little tensely for her answer, conscious that it might have immense importance for himself.

"Philip? But I . . ." She withdrew a little and a small frown puckered her smooth forehead.

"I know, I know," he broke in hastily. "This is none of my concern, but since I . . . we found you . . . and Jen, and since you are alone out here, I feel . . . well, a sense of responsibility for you, almost like . . . well, an older brother's if you will, and while Sergeant Maxwell is a fine soldier, he is not bound by a gentleman's code and I . . . well, a young girl alone . . ."

Here he floundered to a halt, completely aware that he was now treading upon shaky ground, that he sounded faintly pompous, and that she had withdrawn even farther and was regarding him coolly. He could have kicked himself. My God, how I've muffed it! he thought. This is no business of mine, and if she is in love with Maxwell, what a damn ass I am! Is that what disturbs me most, perhaps? That she should be in love with him?

"Ah, that's so," she replied resentfully. "It isn't thy concern. Fortunately for thee, I am grown." Yet beneath her anger, she was thinking in confusion and dismay, oh, older brother indeed! How could he be so—so insulting? Does he think me still in pigtails, and brainless to boot! Still, I suppose he means to be kind. Undoubtedly, he gets all this from Mary, with her hints that poor Philip is beneath me. Oh, dear, if only he wouldn't be so nice one minute, so patronizing the next! In mingled indignation and hurt pride, and close to tears, she forgot all about slavery, all about her troubled conscience. She wanted only to get away from him before she openly wept. Luckily, the music stopped and a new partner hurried forward to claim her.

"Phebe, please, I'm sorry if I made you angry. I . . ." he murmured contritely, wanting to recapture her eagerness and excitement, the

affectionate glance she had given him, which had soothed his own troubled spirit so quickly, the warmth, and what was it? concern? with which she had first greeted him. But obviously the moment had slipped through his fingers. Alienated, she was swept away, while the music, drowning his apology, left him to stand unheard and dumb, overwhelmed by a sense of defeat and by something else he had not felt for many, many months—urgency. She must not be angry with him. She must not!

Oh, is that all he feels? she thought miserably as she danced away. The interest of an older brother? But why not? I am no great belle, and anyway, I . . . he is so charming and so handsome, everyone admires him, all the women here, so how could I ever think anything . . . anything at all! Ah, if I could only run away somewhere to weep. . . .

TWENTY-TWO

As spring approached, the quiescent violence of the winter flared into the open again, at first in isolated and sporadic incidents, a few raids and repeated warnings by the Regulators to Free-Soilers in outlying districts. As the weather warmed, however, Leavenworth itself began to seethe and its people to approach a state of perpetual uproar. Not a day passed without some harsh incident in the town or its immediate vicinity. Men came and went in the muddy streets, milled about before the saloons on the levee and Shawnee Street, or stood in sullen groups, talking loudly.

The renewal of the raids and clashes between bands of Free-Soil and pro-slavery forces kept the dragoons busy on patrol and guard duty. There was little that they could do other than watch the roads and use their presence as a warning and a hindrance to outright border war. In Leavenworth itself, they were helpless to lift a finger, so jealous of their civilian authority were the town officials, most of whom were pro-slavery sympathizers. In the countryside, the dragoons' effectiveness was limited by the very nature of the struggle. The raiders appeared out of nowhere, struck swiftly, and were swallowed up again by the land, their small bands separating,

the men riding home to their claims in twos and threes, to put up their guns until the next attack was called, or simply crossing the Missouri beyond the reach of federal troops. The dragoons were deployed in detachments hither and yon across the Territory, with little or no authority from Washington to do much else besides watch the show.

The Free-Soil people could not understand why federal troops were unable to protect their lives and property, and their ballot boxes, from the raiders coming from other states, particularly Missouri, and to add to the Free-Soilers' charge that the dragoons were aiding and abetting the Southern cause, the troops themselves were divided in sentiment. The enlisted men were for the most part Free-State-minded, while many of the officers were pro-slavery, and of course in a better position to aid their cause. On the whole, the dragoons did operate as a neutral force when they operated at all, but there were incidents—enough of them, unfortunately—in which they actively assisted one side or another, and these incidents and the side taken usually depended on the whim and sympathy of the commander.

K Troop was involved in one such incident. Assigned to patrol and guard a small, crossroads village from a group of Missouri raiders busy in the neighborhood, they had taken up positions on either side of the Free-Soil town, with Major Arnold in command. During the course of several days of routine and uneventful patrolling, a number of civilian visitors conferred with the major in his tent. To St. Clair's surprise, he had seemed on friendly, even gay terms, with these roughly-dressed, rough-appearing men who came and went so freely through the dragoon lines. On the third day, Arnold abruptly ordered the detail patrolling on the south side of the town to leave the road and fan out across the prairie to search, he said, for several horsemen he'd sighted through his glasses in the area. While the detail was off beating the bushes of the ravines, the raiders came down the conveniently empty road, hit the town by surprise, wounded one settler, and burnt four cabins and two barns before the major leisurely sent in troopers to see what all the shooting and smoke was about. By the time they arrived, the Missouri men were gone, the buildings were in ashes, and the Free-Soil squatters ready to curse the sight of army blue. Arnold had

received their complaints with a thin smile and complete indifference, and had ridden off to make his report as he saw fit.

When the shooting had first broken out, St. Clair had said nothing, had made no move. Confused, he sat his horse with the others on the prairie, with a full view of the attack in the town slightly below. When the smoke began to rise over the small cluster of buildings, it dawned on him that the raiders had gotten through. Yet he did not wholly understand, and he spurred his horse toward Arnold. "Sir, the raiders must have gotten around our flank. Shall I take some men down there?"

Arnold had eyed him coldly. "I don't think that's necessary, Lieutenant. I doubt, under the circumstances, that we even *have* a flank here."

St. Clair had stared at him blankly. Arnold laughed aloud, genuinely amused, and when comprehension finally crossed the other's face, his laugh turned mocking. "Well, Lieutenant?" he had demanded.

St. Clair had hesitated. All the qualms, all his hatred of that damning voice held him silent. He remembered Lieutenant Bird and his stand before the Sioux village, and wondered how much, if any, difference lay in their respective situations. He was willing enough to concede that Bird was the better man, for his own self-respect was extinct. He had already lost dignity, integrity, honor, whatever it was which kept a man walking upright, his head erect. In his despair he had even gone to the general, asking to be allowed to resign his commission, but this, too, was coldly rebuffed.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, that's impossible. Your commitment for your commission has a little more than another year to run, so I shall have to refuse even to forward your request. For your own good, sir, and if you wish ever to live in peace with yourself, my advice is to brace up and prove yourself right here and now! Young man, you cannot run away from your problems and be a man!"

Well, here he was, facing those problems, staring down at the dwindling smoke in the village, hearing the sporadic firing dying away. Just how was he to make a stand against this, so deliberately conceived and accomplished? How was he to stand against this man? The thing was done, he could not help the people down there now. In all probability, he could not even get his own personal protest past his commander, for his men would not back him up; they had

no respect for him, and far too much fear of Arnold for that. No, he thought, defeated, there's nothing I can do here. He gave it up as Arnold dismissed him. Yet, he was aware, and not without a certain sense of relief, that he had at least thought to try.

A few days later, Bill Price visited his small room in Bedlam. He had hated to see St. Clair's strange apathy grow as he stood by helplessly, watching his friend sink deeper and deeper into a morass of indifference and drink. He had at last begun to realize where the trouble lay. The gossip was fully born now and on the increase at the fort. Price had heard this sort of talk before concerning Mary Arnold, and he had observed the results: a promising young officer disgraced a year ago and shipped down to Fort Union, a remote post where duty was both harsh and lonely. Price guessed, then, that his friend was having an affair with Mrs. Arnold, and that Arnold knew it, or suspected it, and that this was at the bottom of the whole business.

"See here, Larry, I've been wanting to talk to you, but I haven't known just how the hell to go about it! Anyhow, I'd rather walk through a damn fire, because I doubt you'll take any more kindly to having me tend to your private concerns than I would if you tried it. But, by God, this has got to be said!" Here he stuck, unable to come straight to the point. How could you demand to know if a man was having an affair with another man's wife? How did you go about mixing in these touchy concerns? Flustered, Price settled on a warning. The least he could do was tell his deluded friend to beware. "Look here, Larry," he began again, gathering indignation, "you don't want to take all this stuff from the major to heart. The things that have been happening in your detachment aren't all your fault, and I'm not the only one who knows this now. Why, hell, we all saw what he did to you the other day, the bastard!"

"Who?" St. Clair asked listlessly. "What are we talking about, Bill?"

"Arnold. Who else? He's a damned monster, Larry, and the sooner you see it, the better! You've got to watch him. He's after your scalp, and he doesn't care how he gets it. By God, I believe every word I've ever heard about him, and a hell of a lot more!"

"Oh, I don't know, Bill. He's not so bad. He's a good officer. I suppose he's one of the best out here," St. Clair replied indifferently. He had long ago ceased trying to excuse himself by damning his

commander. He was so sure now that he himself was at fault that he thought of Arnold's harshness as only a strict but fair discipline. He had, after all, proved only one small point about himself, that fear and cowardice need not be the same. It would take time before he could be any more certain of the correctness of his decision on the Platte, and every other decision and decisive action that had followed.

Besides, he could not help but admire the man, and the more his own self-respect had sunk, the more his respect for the other had risen. He watched with envy the way Arnold handled men, the way he planned his marches, executed his orders. He did things in a natural authoritative manner, and with dispatch and no anxiety. His subordinates jumped to obey, and St. Clair confused this fear with respect, without understanding that he did so. Whatever caught at Arnold's attention was righted and made orderly at once; he never put off or hesitated, but made up his mind and gave his commands. He was patently an excellent officer, and the more St. Clair found to admire in him, the less he found in himself, and the blinder he became to the questionable nature of Arnold's treatment of himself. It was a vicious and closed circle, and he was so far ensnared and so helpless that he could not escape without outside help of some kind. Arnold had done his work well; so much so that St. Clair's first real moment of doubt about him had come only the other day, when Arnold had deliberately drawn the dragoons off the road, leaving the way for the pro-slavery riders to sweep down upon the town.

He listened now to his friend, at first only half-digesting what he was saying, but gradually it dawned on him that Price was warning him, that he was saying, in effect, that Arnold had for some reason singled him out for revenge. He saw, too, that his friend was very much in earnest.

"Believe me, I know what I'm talking about, Larry, because it's happened before; you aren't the first junior officer he's tried to ruin. I don't know exactly why he picked you, but . . . well, I can guess. And you understand, I hope, that he's completely capable of it. Hell, he'd kill you if he thought he could get away with it!"

"Oh, come, Bill . . ."

"Come, nothing! I tell you he would, and think nothing of it! He's mad, Larry, mad!"

As he listened, St. Clair wondered a little about himself. Was he altogether so hopeless then? Was he really an utter failure as an officer, as a man? Yet he had sunk so far, and his own estimate of himself was so low, that it would take time for him to revise his own opinion of himself and to understand fully how much his troubles were due to factors beyond his control. The mirror was there and he had looked, but the image was clouded still.

Meanwhile, the inability of the dragoons to protect the Free-Soil settlers grew daily more apparent, and cries of protest mounted all over the North as news of the Kansas strife began to spread across the country. It seemed especially ironic that Leavenworth, right under the walls of the fort, should be a hotbed of lawlessness.

TWENTY-THREE

The Tanners came into town one Saturday morning to find it seething with wild activity. Men swarmed among the buildings, horses and wagons wandered up and down the streets, dignified for the most part by that name, for they were little more than muddy ruts running this way and that, skirting a building here, dashing between two there, and all dependent on the whim of the meandering wagons. If a driver thought he could get where he wanted to go quicker than the established ruts allowed, he would dash in between two buildings and swerve around them, thus creating a new thoroughfare.

As Jen drove the black Morgan slowly into the heart of Leavenworth, he and Phebe were deafened by the uproar. Men shouted at the top of their voices, horses galloped up and down, splashing mud liberally over the cursing pedestrians, wagon wheels squealed and groaned as a mule train of four loaded wagons started away from a warehouse, where a pile of meat on gunny sacks was drawing flies revived by the warming sun. Just as they drew around the mule train, the hoarse whistle of a steamboat blew on the river and pandemonium broke loose. Men rushed past the wagon, shouting,

laughing, waving hats and bottles or drawn pistols above their heads. One man cut in under the Morgan's nose, forcing Jen to stand to the reins to keep from running him down. A drunk, sitting stupidly under the wooden awning of the new fur company, climbed the wall behind him to gain his feet, his bleary face showing a measure of the excitement which could bring even him this far from his stupor.

A man running in the street on Phebe's side of the wagon shouted wildly, "Here come the goddam Yankees!" She paled, but was too fascinated by the scene to feel afraid.

Jen stared at the mob swelling before their eyes. "Does thee think we should go on, Pheb?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes. I cannot think what is happening. They seem to have gone mad!"

Several drunks reeled by, with a wink and a leer for the girl, and Jen was suddenly frightened. "We'd better go back!" he exclaimed, pulling the horse up short.

"No, Jen," she said firmly, taking the reins from him and ignoring the ribald faces turned their way. "If thee seems to fear this sort of person, they only grow bolder. And we must go on to Mr. Knox's for the flour and saleratus and pork if we are to eat."

At the fringe of the mob a man staggered and sat down in the mud. For a moment he simply sat, his legs stretched out straight before him, as though he contemplated his ragged boots. Suddenly, he fell back and lay still.

"Is he dead, Pheb?" Jen asked in awe as she maneuvered the wagon past the prostrate form. He stared over the wheel in wonder at the man.

"Mercy, no! Just drunk I believe," she declared in disgust. In spite of her cool words of a minute before, she was relieved when they drew up to the store and gained its dim shelter.

"What on earth is happening, Mr. Knox?" she cried as they entered. "People seem to have lost their minds!"

He straightened from an inspection of a barrel's contents and smiled. "Hello, Miss Tanner. How'ye, lad? Lost their minds? Lord, yes, they've lost what minds they got! It's a bad day to come to town, Miss Tanner, though it do seem like there ain't any good days left!"

"Is there trouble?"

He nodded. "Yep, trouble enough, leastwise there will be. Emigrants coming. A passel of 'em is due any minute on the *Polar Star*, and them Regulators are bound and determined to give 'em welcome and a trip back to St. Louis, whether they want it or no. Heard, too, that they'd rounded up some settlers beyond Salt Creek and was figuring on sending 'em downriver with the rest."

"Can't anybody stop them? Why . . . why, they might have come all the way from . . . from Pennsylvania!" Phebe was dismayed at the thought that these people might have endured the long, hard trip out to Kansas only to be shipped back again, and she could have nothing but pity for this futility.

"Might. Likely did," he replied, shrugging, "but there ain't anybody I know of can stop them Regulators, Miss Tanner. Ain't anybody stopped 'em yet."

"Surely, the marshal . . ."

He grinned wryly, "Nope, not the marshal. The law in Leavenworth, and pretty nearly everywhere in the Territory, don't like us Yankees none. No, I reckon nobody's going to stop 'em. I figure it'd be best to just let 'em have their way without riling 'em up more'n can be helped. Emigrants'll have to just turn around and come on into Kansas by way of Iowa, like Jim Lane been a-saying all along."

"Somebody ought to do something!" she cried indignantly. "Couldn't somebody go up to the fort and ask for troop protection? Surely the government would uphold the laws here, and surely the Regulators have no right to force people to go back!"

He sighed patiently. "Well, now, I reckon you've heard the same talk I have when it comes to them troops. The President seems like he's got more sympathy for the slaveholding folk than for the rest of us, and I reckon he wouldn't allow the dragoons to come into town to protect folks' property and the like. Wouldn't take but a handful at that," he added wistfully.

"Why, it's . . . it's anarchy! It isn't right!" To herself she thought, ah, I am too civilized. I cannot accept this disorder, all this lawlessness. I am green, Eastern green, like Larry, only far more so because I expect too much from people and he expects nothing at all. It was something of a revelation, and she paused, turning it over in her mind in surprise, almost forgetting her present indignation. Does that mean that Larry is innately far more gentle, and is

gentleness equated by the world with cowardice? I've heard that said of Friends, I've heard that said many times. How odd that I never thought of it before! Hadn't her uncle said, many times too, "If thee believes in anything deeply, thee must be prepared to suffer for thy faith. That, as far as it goes, is noble enough, but alas for the world and for men, too many of us who believe so firmly force others to suffer for what is our ideal. This is not our right, this is bigotry." But where was the line? Did it run plainly just short of violence?

"Sure, it isn't right, Miss Tanner," Mr. Knox was saying soothingly, "Them Missouri men got no right whatever coming across the river like they do and running our affairs to suit themselves, but I tell you I'm getting kind of used to watching 'em do it. When they killed Reese Brown in January with hatchets and dumped him out in front of his wife, I figured from then on they'd do anything to a man standing in their way." His voice turned bitter, and his usually amiable face bleak. "I tell you, Miss Tanner, best right now to tend to our knitting and wait for the time, and it'll come soon enough, when things'll come more our own way. I been hearing how Jim Lane figures to . . ."

He never finished. Loud, harsh voices under the wooden awning at the front of the store gave him just time for a grimace of warning to her before four men came tramping through the door, their boots like small explosions on the floorboards. "Blue Lodge men," he whispered. "Best move over to the counter and let Ed be fixing up your list."

Without a glance at the men squeezing in among the boxes and barrels, she and Jen moved over to the counter, where Ed Knox bustled about at once to gather their things. "Hate them no-goods coming in here," he murmured. "Hate to see 'em, they rile Pa so! Someday he's going to bust out, he gets so mad!"

"Those pieces of ribbon in their belts mean they're Blue Lodge, don't they?" Jen asked.

"Yes. They figger if you know who they are you'll get real scared!" Ed Knox whispered.

Behind her, Phebe could hear the shuffling, guffawing men, the loud hiss of spittle against the flanks of the stove, the crash of something struck by the toe of a boot.

"How you stand on the goose, old man?" one of them asked loudly.

The girl could feel her own anger rising again, the old hatred for this stupidity mounting like a dark, alien fury through her whole being. Oh, Lord, she thought, how I detest them!

"He's a goddam Yankee, can't you tell?"

The voice sounded vaguely familiar, and she glanced sideways, almost jumping as she recognized the man who had led the raid from the streets at the school just before Christmas, the man who had been the leader that day last summer when the dragoons had come around Sentinel Hill to find the Missouri men and the Negro in ropes. Brad . . . Bradshaw, she thought. That's what they called him.

"Hell, yes, he's a Yankee!" Bradshaw said. "I can smell one a mile coming and three going!"

The men roared with laughter, egging each other on, trampling and jostling each other as they crowded in upon the tall, lank storeman, pushing him back among the barrels until he could not retreat another inch.

"How do you stand, storeman? You stand right on the goose and you ain't got no call to be scared of us."

Mr. Knox shrugged. "Anything I can do for you?" he asked coolly.

"You can damn well answer our question civilly!" It was Bradshaw's flat, strangely thin voice again.

"Aw, come on, Brad, let's get our tobacco and get on down to the levee where the real fun is!"

"Well, hell, go on, help yourself. This old man don't know how he stands on the goose, so what you waiting for? Can't complain about that, can you, storeman? A man's got to make his choice."

Without further urging, three of the men climbed over the counter, shouldering the younger Knox to one side as they hunted out tobacco, helping themselves liberally to boxes of plug and tins of smoking mixture. One dipped his filthy hands again and again into the cracker barrel, passing out the contents to his grinning companions. Phebe was so astonished that she forgot all caution and turned to watch, not noticing that Bradshaw was staring at her, his thin mouth curving into a smile.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, so suddenly that she jumped and Jen

whirled around. "Hey! I seen you somewhere before, Miss, now, ain't I? Sure, you're the schoolmarm at that Abolitionist's school!" He came up to stand directly in front of her, grinning widely. He made an exaggerated bow, taking off his dusty, stained hat to slap it against his thigh, heedless of the dust that flew from it to her own clean skirt. "Couldn't hardly forget how you slipped the preacher out from under us that day. Been wondering when we'd meet up again. I even been thinking I ought to look you up. Getting kind of interested in what that old preacher's been up to, all the time traveling around in his wagon nights. Don't look so good for a man his age and calling!" And he laughed, tipping back his head a little, his eyes still fixed upon her face.

The other men came around the counter, busily stuffing boxes and tins into their pockets. They stood a moment, watching their leader impatiently. Finally one of them spoke up. "Aw, come on Brad, the *Star*'ll be come and gone the time you're taking!"

"Keep your damn shirt on, Bill!" He turned back to Phebe. "You know, I been meaning to pay you a visit but ain't had the time. I'll be along one of these days right soon. Be the neighborly thing, now that I got a claim out there in the valley, too. Besides, I reckon I ought to be suspicious about them wagons coming into your place nights. Might be the old preacher for all I know, and I heard it said not a day ago that some thinks he's helping runaway niggers to get to Canada. Would you know anything about that, Miss, seeing you teach school for him?" His drawl was as thin as his lips, and though it sounded soft and easy now, there was an undertone like a rib of iron through a featherbed.

"I would be grateful if thee would be neighborly enough to mind thy manners!" Phebe retorted, turning away. Behind the counter Ed Knox stood rooted, his mouth open, a sack of flour dangling under his arm.

"She shore ain't a Southern girl!" one of the men remarked. "Only a Yankee'd have that much vinegar!"

"Ma'am," Mr. Knox spoke up sharply, and Phebe recognized the warning in his voice. "We can settle that bill next time you're in. Ed, take the things on out to the wagon!"

His cold tone galvanized his son into action.

"Thank you," Phebe replied, and taking Jen by the hand, she swept out of the store. Before the men had collected themselves, she

and Jen were on the wagon seat and she had the reins unwrapped from the brake-handle.

"Say, wait a minute, Miss. I want to talk to . . ." Bradshaw ran out of the store, moving out from under the awning as she lifted the reins over the Morgan's back. The horse moved away as Ed Knox dumped the box of groceries in the wagonbed, half-running after them to settle it right side up on the floorboards.

"Thank you, Ed," she called after him, ignoring the other. She laid the reins against the horse's back, sending him into a quick, high-stepping trot. "Ah, Jen," she cried furiously, "I could almost kill them!"

"Who are they, Pheb?" They rocked around the corner of the *Herald* office, a rickety frame building, and she straightened out the wagon, heading it down the street toward the valley road.

"Who are they? Ah, not much more than animals! Oh, dear, I hope they cause no trouble for Mr. Knox, and Ed." This thought sobered her, and she twisted in the seat to look back anxiously over her shoulder. "Does thee think that we should return, Jen?"

"No," he replied shrewdly. "Thee would only make matters worse for Mr. Knox, for thee is too impetuous."

"Impetuous? I?" she cried, startled. "Come now, don't josh me, Jen. I'm too angry and upset to take thy joking in good grace!"

"I'm not joshing thee, Pheb," he replied gravely. "It's true, for thee does not know when to keep still."

"Now, Jen," she cried warningly, but was distracted by the sight of a heavy, canvas-topped wagon lurching toward them on the road ahead. As they came abreast of it, a voice called, "Howdy there, Miss Tanner." Phebe pulled Rob Roy to a halt, recognizing one of their neighbors in the valley, a Free-Soil squatter named Eldridge.

"Why, thee appears to be bound for some distancel" she exclaimed, staring at the motley assortment of household goods lashed to the wagon's sides. There was a spinning wheel, an axe, water keg, clothes-stomper, brass-bound trunk, and as she stared, bewildered, Mrs. Eldridge thrust her tousled yellow head through the canvas behind the wagon-seat to add her greeting to her husband's. Behind her, the narrow wagonbed was piled with more things. "Thee is not leaving Kansas?" Phebe asked, alarmed at the sight.

"Aye, we're leaving," Mr. Eldridge replied grimly. "We're going on home."

"Home? But . . . but whatever for?"

"Claim's been jumped. They come out around sunup this mornin', them fellers, and tore down my soddy, run down my fences. We ain't got no place to go, and I ain't man enough nohow to go agin their warning, not when I got two kids! They let me take most of my gear, but they done tore down my soddy." He repeated this last emotionlessly, his face weary and expressionless, his heavy shoulders sagging as he stared with brooding eyes at the flicking ears of his oxen.

"Who were they? Does thee mean Regulators?"

"Regulators, Blue Lodge, Law and Order! I reckon they're all the same, and it don't make no difference to a Free-Soil man which one comes a-calling. Never did see these before. Mean-looking young feller was leading 'em on. Only him and three no-counts, but t'was enough! Well, ain't a bit of use crying when the milk's been spilt, and we'd best be on our way. If I was you, Miss Tanner, I'd look out mighty sharp. No telling when they'll be by your place, though it do be small."

"But, Mr. Eldridge, we'd be very happy if thee and thy family would stay with us until thy claim is settled, and I would be glad to bear witness for thee that thee did not claim-jump. Surely, if thee went to the law . . ."

He shook his head, his dour face showing no hope. "There ain't no law to go to, leastwise not for Free-Soil settlers with little money in their pockets and no hope of much more. And if I did go to what law there is, I reckon they'd be back to fix me and my family good. That one fellow was mean-looking and mean-talking! No, ma'am, a man with kids 'ud be a fool to try to fight 'em. We'll be going on back to Ohio where it don't mean a man's life to stand up for what he believes." He shook out his long whip over the backs of the gaunt oxen, and the heavy wagon creaked into motion once more. The Tanners waved to the Eldridges, and after the wagon had passed, two little girls stuck their heads over the tailgate to send their shrill cries of farewell back to them as they sat and watched the slow progress of wagon and goods over the crest of the hill.

"Well, that is a sad sight!" Phebe exclaimed, her bitterness increased tenfold.

"What are claim-jumpers, Pheb?" Jen asked as they, too, started off again.

"Oh, for the most part Missouri men come raiding across the river to burn down squatters' buildings and to drive them off their claims, then stick four logs in a foundation square to file on it themselves, saying that the original squatter hadn't proved up. It's one way they have of driving off the Free-Soil people."

"Mr. Eldridge was frightened, wasn't he, Pheb?"

"Yes," she replied soberly. "I suppose he had good reason to be. I know that it must be difficult to stand up for thy faith if thee is afraid for thy family. Poor man! He worked hard all last winter, though he had the ague and shakes half the time, and then poor Mrs. Eldridge lost her baby. I cannot understand why somebody does not put a stop to all this lawlessness! There are all those soldiers up there," and she gestured indignantly toward the distant fort, "running about chasing Indians, when right under their noses people are being robbed and murdered and forcibly prevented from coming into the Territory!"

"Philip says it's the officers' fault," Jen put in. "He says most of 'em are from the South, and that they see to it the soldiers don't interfere with the Blue Lodge men. Does thee not remember the free Negro Lieutenant St. Clair let them take that day? Did thee not say he was from the South, and that his father owned slaves?"

Disconcerted, she nodded, her blue eyes troubled. "I . . . I don't know, Jen. He seems . . . well, fair about such things, and as for that poor man at Sentinel Hill, Larry did speak of the army and civil affairs, and I do know that the military is not allowed to meddle unless it has been ordered to interfere."

"Even when a man's life is at stake? Philip says that is not so, that he could have ordered the dragoons to release him."

"Jen, I don't know, and neither does thee. Nor am I sure that Philip knows so much about the law and what the army can or cannot do. He is very hot-headed and certain of what is right, while Larry is . . . well, he tries to see all sides, he tries to be sure that he is right before he . . . before he acts."

There was enough doubt in her voice to make her brother daring. "Why does thee always make excuses for the lieutenant, Pheb? What does thee care if he is not brave, like Philip?"

"That is enough, Jen! Thee speaks too freely and too familiarly

of thy elders!" she replied sharply, silencing him, though a moment later he began to whistle. Jen was a good whistler, he carried his tune and played easily up and down the scale. At the sound Phebe's uncertain thoughts were shattered. Ah, she thought, listening to Jen whistle a martial-sounding air, something Philip no doubt had taught him, if only I were a man I could do something . . . but she stopped, caught by the memory of Mr. Knox's words after the schoolhouse incident, "'Course, it's easier in a way for you, Miss Tanner. You can stand upon being a woman," and she felt a touch of shame. If I were a man, she wondered, would I have any more courage than they—Mr. Knox, Mr. Eldridge? Would I risk my life, or all that I had worked so hard for, or worse still, the lives of my children? Would I even be able to bring myself to kill these men I so detest? Of course, she thought, feeling suddenly weary, I'll never know. I'll never know what it is to have to make this decision. I can only imagine that somewhere, at some time, one must fight evil with evil, and yet, I do not see how it can be possible. In her pre-occupation she did not notice her brother's troubled face change, grow grim and determined, his expression far older than his years.

When they arrived at the cabin, he waited his opportunity and took it the minute she went off to set food in the springhouse. He climbed on a chair and carefully took the old musket from its pegs above the fireplace. Hurrying, he hunted up powder and shot, and handling the gun with a mixture of awe and affection, loaded it as his uncle had taught him half a year ago when they were preparing for the long trek west.

"Always treat a gun with respect," his uncle had said, patting the musket as he might a favorite dog. "Now this one is old, and hasn't done much to earn a living, but I once won a few shooting matches with her, even though I've never pulled the trigger to kill a living thing. I took her on debt, and for plain curiosity's sake I learned to shoot her, and if I say it myself, turned out to have a marksman's eye if not his heart. Yet, the West is harsh, they say, and it is not unlikely that we will suffer hunger, or that I shall have to go against the faith if thy scalp is threatened, so it is best that she travel with us. Sometimes, I suppose, if he starves, or his family is endangered, a man must contemplate killing."

Jen remembered this clearly as he loaded the gun and hung it back in place. There might come a time, he told himself grimly, and

there might come a claim-jumper, and if that happens, I'll be ready and so will the old gun. Philip says when a man thinks he's got thee cornered, he's sure to strike, but if he doesn't know, then he might just as easily turn around and let a person be. But, he added prudently, best to say nothing to Pheb!

TWENTY-FOUR

This is the last, absolutely the last time!

She meant to be determined, she meant to be decisive, but the dress muffling her head as she struggled into it also seemed to muffle her will, and she found herself as she emerged as helpless and uncertain as ever. As long ago as January after the hateful New Year's Ball she had determined never to visit the fort again, to cut loose as gracefully as she could from the Arnolds, yet here she was, dressing for another of Mary's parties. After tea he was to come, he was to be there for dinner, there would be an entire evening of his company, and that is why, that is why, she told herself, I am so weak-willed and so foolish and so wrong! She smoothed down the dark-blue skirt, shaking out the hem, and fastened the small buttons at the waist. To say no is really very simple, she thought in agitation, but I seem totally unable to say it when Larry is to be there! And now I will go, I will see him, I will be in heaven, and I'll have a very difficult time saying no all over again! I can only think what a silly fool I am, for what does it mean? Mercy, I have no idea! There is nothing, nothing except fancy on my part. Why should he ever think of me? No doubt, if he thinks of me at all,

it's only as an awkward girl. Why, he as much as said so at the ball, and I, silly fool, have already forgotten. It took me little enough time to get over my anger, and though I know it is ridiculous, I let myself think that, perhaps, after all, he might not have meant it so!

She sighed and buttoned her tight bodice, patting the lace collar and cuffs into place, wondering how she looked, and wanting to look beautiful. Vanity! Ah, that too, she told herself, trying again to be stern, but giving it up abruptly, knowing that there was nothing for her to do except swim with the current. Thee is out of thy depth, Phebe Tanner. Thee had best watch thyself!

She had never known anyone like St. Clair. He was handsome, intelligent, well-educated and well-traveled, yet at the same time that she found herself admiring him, she could feel exasperated, even disappointed by what seemed to her his indifference to the moral questions which plagued her so. Even more puzzling, she sometimes found herself wishing to help him. Why *he* should need help she could not imagine, but there were times when she felt sure that he was as confused and uncertain as herself, times when he seemed even unhappy. Her concern was prompted originally by the same innate kindness that had led her to do her best to protect Maxwell from embarrassment, but it had not rested there, perhaps because St. Clair's needs seemed to run deeper than awkwardness. And perversely, she wanted not only to help him but to run to him for shelter from her own confusions and her own loneliness. This ambivalence baffled her—and alarmed her. Never before had she wanted a man's touch . . . or kiss, and she could only acknowledge in secrecy and shame that she very much wanted his.

Yes, thee had best set a watch upon thy heart, silly girl! she told herself, blushing, and lacking a mirror, called Jen in from his wood-chopping to pass judgment on her dress.

"Why . . . why, Pheb, thee looks . . . beautiful!" he exclaimed with such genuine enthusiasm, and with such complete forgetfulness of the Quaker precept of simplicity, that she could not doubt that in his eyes, at any rate, this was so. "Thee looks . . . well, older," he added, gazing at her a little doubtfully, thinking that lately she acted much older, far graver and more serious. She did not wrestle or play or run so wildly and so freely as she used to do, nor did it seem to him that she sang as frequently, and when she did sing, now it was some sad melody. She stood now, smiling at him,

thanking him for his pleasant compliments, and then suddenly her smile turned vague, her eyes stared past him, dreaming off to somewhere. It had occurred to him that perhaps she was sick and he grew frightened.

"Pheb, is thee . . . is thee all right? Thee is well?"

She roused herself with an effort. "What did thee say, Jen?" and at his repeated question, she burst out laughing. "Mercy, yes! Whatever made thee think to ask that? But now I must be off. Thee will be all right, won't thee, Jen? I won't stay overnight if thee wishes. . . ."

"The dog and I can keep house as well as thee!" he retorted scornfully, and she laughed again, tying her black cloak beneath her chin and a shawl firmly over her hair, for the March wind could be capricious.

"I think I'll take Rob Roy, for he'll go like the wind on a day like this. When I get to the fort I can throw my leg over the pommel like a proper lady."

"Don't let Philip . . . or the lieutenant catch thee riding like an Indian!" he warned, and added slyly, grinning as she blushed, "Philip wouldn't care, but the lieutenant's hoity-toity and likes his ladies to be ladylike."

"Oh, Jen! Thee is so foolish!" She stared at him in some astonishment. How quick he has become, she thought. I do believe that he is growing up, and is no longer my little brother, but my big one! More sternly, she added, "Don't josh me, Jen. It is not against a man to have manners and gentleness. Thee knows that is especially true among the Friends."

He flushed hotly. "Thee can call it manners, Pheb, or what thee wishes, but I . . ."

"Hush! Let's not start that again. Thee cannot spoil my pleasure with argument this day! Ah, Jen, thee is getting such a man!" Moved by impulse and by the hurt upon his face, she ran over and hugged him, then laughed at his confusion and pleasure and went off singing, this time, he noted, a merry song.

Outside, she drew a deep breath, delighted with the rawness of the windy spring day. In the shed, she quickly saddled the gelding and led him out to the stump she used as a mounting block. When she was firmly in the saddle, the horse began to sidestep eagerly, as if he, too, found pleasure in the wind. When she turned him into

the road and loosened the reins, he started off at a brisk trot, his small head up, long black tail flying.

Dark clouds scudded low along the horizon, driven by the alternately fierce and amiable wind. The sun was bright one minute, eclipsed the next, so that the whole countryside seemed to flow beneath light and shadow. The threat of rain hung heavy in the damp atmosphere, while the earth was still saturated from earlier storms. Puddles reflected brief glimpses of the sun, trees bent and danced to the uncertain music of the wind; small rivulets of water ran in all directions through mud and greening grass. As Phebe turned her horse onto the trail running through the woods toward the fort, she heard young alders clashing along the banks of a narrow brook, while deeper in the forest, dead trees creaked and groaned and sawed against each other. She felt the gloomy mood of the leafless wood, with its sodden carpet of moldy black leaves, yet she also felt the mood lighten where, here and there, new green-tipped buds thrust by the millions from bare branches, and small purple flowers bloomed shyly in sunny, sheltered places. Buffeted spring was creeping in beneath the wind and spreading, emerging slowly from the woods to repaint the drying hillsides and the floor of a meadow.

Excited by the wind, the girl spurred her horse into a canter, and from a canter into a gallop, completely heedless of the slippery footing of the trail, the branches reaching from the edge, some meeting just over her head. A tree wailed suddenly, sending a cry like the cry of a lost child from the depths of the wood, and she laughed, leaning low over the gelding's neck. Never had she felt so reckless or so joyful, and it was not surprising that she did not even see the horseman come over the hill toward her, approaching at a sedate trot.

Nor did St. Clair see her at once. He was happily lost in thought. He had just made a sudden and startling discovery and he was as delighted as anyone hopelessly lost would be to find himself among the familiar again. What a damn fool I've been! he thought regretfully. I've been so concerned with myself, so blindly tied up with all my little hopes and fears . . . Ah, my God, if it just isn't too late! And he thought with a pang of Maxwell, re-creating the warmth of Phebe's voice when she spoke of the other man, the

affection and troubled concern in her blue eyes when he was present. Didn't that mean that she . . .

He heard the wet splash of hooves ahead and looked up. Startled by the sight of the black horse charging headlong down the narrow trail toward him, he unthinkingly raised his hand, reining in his own horse, and shouted, "Hey!"

Rob Roy threw up his head, snorting in fear. Instinctively he checked his pace, stiffening his legs while his hooves skidded in the mud, plowing greasy furrows along the trail. Phebe braced herself as best she could as the gelding came to an abrupt halt and almost went down, but unbalanced by the unexpected change of pace, she sailed slowly and with a kind of majestic dignity over his shoulder, to land with a hard, breath-snatching thump in the brush and mud at the edge of the lane. The wind was knocked from her body and she spent the next few seconds trying to recover a precious lungful of air, unaware of pain, indignity, or the presence of the anxious horseman above her. Finally, breathing again, she cried out an indignant, "Oh!" and burst into tears, covering her face with her muddy hands, which did nothing to help her altered appearance.

"My God, are you hurt?"

Aghast at the sound of that familiar voice, she gulped down a sob in mid-passage and peeked through her fingers, to find St. Clair, ashen and grim, bending over her.

"Oh, Pheb," he groaned, "Oh, my dear, have I killed you?"

With an effort she swallowed her sobs and struggled to regain her feet. "I don't think thee has quite killed me," she replied doubtfully, "but if thee will give me a hand I will see how much of me is broken. Oh, dear . . . oh, oh! My dress!" She stared down in numb horror at the bedraggled, mud-daubed skirt, while he supported her with one hand and tried ineffectually to brush off some of the dirt with the other. He only succeeded in smearing it more.

"My God, I could have killed you, shouting like that! I'm so damn sorry, Pheb. Believe me, I'd cut off my right arm rather than hurt you . . . what a fool I was!"

She was so astonished that she looked up from the dismal ruin of her dress to stare at him. Pheb, he'd said, using Jen's pet name! How odd. But oh, dear, whatever must he think of me? she thought, overcome again by dismay, seeing herself suddenly as she must have

looked as she came full-tilt down the trail, riding astride like an . . . an Indian as Jen said, and then coming such a cropper in the mud! How dreadful! She all but moaned aloud, and almost but not quite burst into tears again.

"If only I hadn't shouted!" he kept repeating. "I could have killed you!"

Her dismay turned to sudden irritation. She knew she must look a sight, and his ceaseless apologies and futile efforts to brush off the mud were the last things she wanted. Oh, if he'd just turn the other way and let me be! she thought angrily. Why doesn't he catch up the horses, do anything, except just stand there staring at me! If he laughs I'll . . . I'll . . . He was far from laughter, however, and his gaze was so contrite and hangdog that ordinarily she would have been the one to laugh, but today her mortification was too great. "Thee need not be so sorry!" she cried. "It is all my fault. I did not look where I was going and so I did not see thee. If thee will please be kind enough to catch up Rob Roy, I'll ride home. . . ."

He turned obediently and caught the gelding's trailing reins, leading him to where she waited impatiently, fighting back her tears. "Ah, but Pheb, you can't miss the party! Can't we patch you up in some way or other? I'd never forgive myself if I made you miss Mary's party, and then, I'd counted on dinner tonight . . . with you."

There it was again. "Pheb," the way Jen said it, and yet not like Jen's way at all. She caught her breath.

Seeing her face light up and a smile start upon her lips, he pressed on, "I hadn't an intention in the world of dumping you in the mud like this. My plans were far more pleasant, and a great deal more honorable. . . . I was only coming out to meet you and beg your permission to be allowed to escort you to Mary's. I was certain that you'd ride on a day like this. . . ." and he smiled, half-anxiously, half-tenderly, adding, "Please, for my sake, Pheb, don't turn back now."

To his immense relief, she laughed, albeit a little shakily, for she had seen the tenderness in his eyes and was disturbed, excited, happy. "I believe thee, Larry, but how could I go to the party looking like this? Mercy, what would the ladies think if I sauntered in, caked with mud from head to toe?"

"Well, they might be a bit startled, but can't we brush a good

part of it off when it dries? And couldn't Rachel help us if we approached by the back door? Ah, Pheb, you wouldn't have me come all this way for nothing, would you?"

A slight suspicion crossed her mind. "Mary didn't send thee, did she, Larry?"

"Mary? No. She has no idea that I'm your self-chosen escort, and if she ever finds out how I've treated you, she'll be furious with me. Doubly so if you don't come on. Please, Pheb."

She broke into a radiant smile which startled him but left him ignorant of the reason for this sudden change of feeling. "All right, Larry, if thee will not be ashamed to be seen with such a dismal creature, I am game to go on. But thee had better think twice before thee decides thee can make a silk purse from such a sow's ear as thee has made me!"

Mary had not sent him! He had come because he wanted to, and for that reason alone! For the first time in her life she began to wonder at the mystery of man and woman, and for the first time felt a hint of the terrible yearning and power of love.

St. Clair turned to catch up his own horse, hiding his smile. Aha, he thought, the Quaker maid is coquetting, and he glanced at her slyly, pleased with the notion. He almost laughed aloud at the sight of her streaked young face, but the wistfulness of her expression, plus a foreknowledge of the vagaries of her temper, restrained him. Besides, with a catch of his breath he saw that, even so, she was altogether lovely. He suggested instead, "There's a little brook not a hundred feet from here, and since you can't possibly get any muddier, why don't we walk over there and let me scrub you off a bit? You must be getting uncomfortable, for that crust seems to be drying." He produced a large, white, and expensive linen handkerchief, and with the reins of both horses in one hand, took her arm to help her along the slippery trail.

"It seems to me," she murmured, "that thee is always helping me to wash up!"

He grinned. "That's so. I'd forgotten, though I don't believe that you were, ah, quite so muddy that first time we met."

She laughed, and when they reached the brook stood meekly while he scrubbed at the mud on her hands and face. "Brrrr," was all she could say until the icy ordeal was over, and he satisfied that he could remove no more. Looking down into her shiny, scrubbed

face, he was startled by the depths of tenderness he felt as he slowly balled the muddy handkerchief in his hands and stuffed it back into the pocket of his jacket. My God, he thought, this is love then! He'd never given more than a passing thought to marriage, much less to a wife. A wife! He glanced obliquely at the girl, astonished at all the odd, longing sensations she could evoke, and of which he'd had so little hint before. He wanted to take her in his arms, but his increasing passion warred strangely with a deep and abiding tenderness which made him wary of frightening her. Shaken, he hastily helped her onto her horse and turned to swing into his own saddle. When he looked around again, he found her sitting demurely sidesaddle.

"No! Wait! As you were, Pheb! Please!" he cried in alarm. "For my sake, please. You'll come another cropper and then I shall have all that work to redo!"

"Does thee not wish me to be ladylike?" she asked, laughing.

"Not at the expense of another tumble and another coat of mud!"

She threw her leg back across the saddle, gave the gelding his head and a sudden thrust of her heels. The horse made a single, gathered leap and was off at a canter, leaving the startled St. Clair behind. By the time he had recovered himself and put spur to his own horse, she was placidly sitting the Morgan at the edge of the woods, waiting with an exaggerated patience for him to catch up. "Why, the little devil!" he thought, grinning.

With more decorum they rode on to the fort, and laughing and chatting, kept a snail's pace all the way to the Arnold quarters. In a flood of happiness Phebe forgot all about being astride, forgot the mud on her clothes, her embarrassment at being tossed without dignity at his feet. She forgot that she had demurred at coming to this party, forgot that her conscience had condemned her weak will, and was actually disappointed when she found they'd arrived before the Arnold door.

TWENTY-FIVE

The woods along the hills were singing, but in the small sutler's cabin on the bluff the wind was a groan, and the sutler himself watched with cold eyes as Major Arnold struggled to pull the door open against its force. The man's drunk, he thought, nodding curtly as Arnold gave him a vague salute and moved into the room, oblivious of the crash of the door at his back. Drunk this early in the day! The man was going to seed, it was plain to see, but then, it had been predictable! Keeping him penned up here at the fort was like trying to get an Indian to take up farming!

"Afternoon, Colonel. Small wind out there, eh?"

"Yes. Noticed that myself. Storm coming, perhaps," the sutler replied briefly, turning back to his accounts. He did not like the major; he did not like him personally and he did not like his reputation, and since he was a blunt old fellow, long since retired from the army, he felt no need to conceal his antipathy. Still, he could pity the fellow. . . .

At the end of the counter, a young lieutenant quietly laid a shining Colt pistol he'd been examining back in its box upon the counter and walked from the store. Two noncommissioned officers

seated at a table near the back broke off their card game abruptly and left. Several soldiers talking in animated voices along the counter, where they had just completed small purchases of snuff and plug tobacco, ceased their conversation and one by one wandered from the store. Within five minutes there were only the sutler, Arnold, a crusty old sergeant near the stove, and Captain Green, smoking his pipe at the end of the counter, his back turned to Arnold as he examined a small, leather-bound Bible.

"Ah, there, Green," Arnold said abruptly, and walked up to him.

The captain swung around, snapping the Bible shut, his movements flustered.

"Good afternoon, Major. Didn't see you come in, sir."

"I gathered that," Arnold replied dryly, but loneliness made him pleasant, and he put himself out a little to keep the junior officer there. "How about a beer if Colonel Ritchie still has that excellent St. Louis import? Eh, Colonel Ritchie?"

"I've a bottle or two left, Major," the sutler said, and moved off into the back room to find it.

"Well, Green, do you regret not going out on the plains this spring? Did you have any pangs when you saw A and B Troops leave yesterday? No, but of course you didn't! You never were one to leave the family willingly, were you?"

"Well, sir, I . . ."

"The tribes will be on the move, they'll be coming out of the woods and the river bottoms, they'll be out on the plains after the buffalo, and I suppose there'll be the usual quota of trouble. No riding till we drop from the saddle for us this year, eh, Green? Like getting old, isn't it? No freezing at dawn, with your blanket covered with soggy dew, no more hearing the wolves keep camp guard. . . ." He sighed and rubbed the knuckle of his right hand along the stiff edge of his mustache.

I should have been born a damn Indian in a wickiup on the plains, he thought. It'd be simple enough then. Wind, sun, grass; nothing to do but steal horses and kill buffalo, and take a scalp now and then when the mood comes on. A man would be against himself alone, without a damn mob waiting to bring him down, hounding along after him like a pack of wolves, waiting for him to tire, waiting for a chance at his throat. . . .

The sutler returned, setting two tin mugs of beer on the counter at Arnold's elbow. Silently, he accepted his money and returned to his accounts, leaving the two officers to themselves. The stained old sergeant still sat by the stove, immovable and unnoticing as a piece of heavy furniture.

"Well, here's luck, Green!"

"Thank you, sir." The room was silent for a long moment as they both drank; then Captain Green placed his mug rather carefully on the counter.

"I expect we'll have work enough to do this summer, Major," he ventured after the odd and awkward moment.

Arnold laughed. "No doubt, no doubt, but you know our handicaps as well as I, Captain. Green men, untried junior officers! Hell, I suppose it's just as well that we're not going West. The first war-party to cut our trail would have our scalps with little trouble."

"Yes, sir. We certainly don't have much of a cadre of trained men, and some of our lieutenants are inexperienced, right enough," Green agreed, but emboldened by his commander's unaccustomed pleasantness, he added, "But don't you think, sir, that perhaps what some of them need is a little more encouragement to give them self-confidence?"

"Encouragement?" Arnold set his own mug down, turning to the other, his eyebrows raised. "Are you, by any chance, referring to Lieutenant St. Clair, Captain?"

"Well, sir, he has been somewhat of a problem in K Troop and . . ."

"You think me too harsh, Captain?"

Green shivered slightly, wishing it all unsaid and himself a good safe mile away, but he'd gone this far, and his conscience was a dull ache that had shown no signs of quitting, so he proceeded, telling himself that he might as well be hung for a goat as a lamb.

"No, sir, not that, but St. Clair is especially in need of self-confidence, and I thought it likely that he might straighten out some if he received a little encouragement. He tried pretty hard there for a while, but lately . . ."

"Ah, Captain, and why this sudden solicitude? Are you hoping for a speedier promotion, perhaps? One coming from the Secretary of War himself? Or his assistant?"

Green flushed and was silent.

"Encouragement, indeed! Sometimes, Captain, a man receives more encouragement to do his duty via a few reprimands and court-martials than in any other way. If nothing else, he is encouraged to see himself for the misfit he is! My God, Green, you talk as if I'd deliberately set out to ruin the fellow!"

"No, sir, I meant nothing of that kind, of course, but there are some people who do think . . . well, that you are . . ." Green broke off abruptly, his face gone beet-red, his eyes suddenly apprehensive.

Arnold stared at him, pushing himself away from the counter and straightening. Even then he was still three inches shorter than his junior officer. "What?" he asked softly. "What is it people think that I am? What people, Captain?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I spoke too quickly. I meant nothing. . . ."

"Nothing? What people, Green? They think I am . . . just what, eh?"

Green picked up his mug, gulped the beer, and set it down with a convulsive bang. The loud sound turned his face darker and brought sweat to his forehead. "If you'll excuse me, Major, I'd better be getting on home. Louise is . . ."

"The hell with Louise! I'm talking to you, Captain!" Arnold's voice was like a whip. All friendliness was gone and his face was bleak, the small mouth thinning angrily beneath his dark mustache. Waiting to bring a man down, he was thinking. All of them, just waiting, wanting a chance at his throat!

Green, stung by the sharp dismissal of his wife and goaded by his heavy conscience, hesitated, then leapt over the brink in sheer desperation. "Sir, they are saying here at the fort that you are especially hard on young St. Clair because you resent his friendliness with your . . . your wife. If you'll excuse me." He moved away quickly, sidling a little, his eyes on Arnold's whitening face, perceiving the growing wildness there, but to his surprise, the major said nothing. Emboldened, he turned at the door. "Thank you for the beer, sir," he said, and then, because he couldn't help it and not because he needed or wanted to, he gave a short, high, deprecatory laugh, half a bark, half a nervous snigger. Horrified, he lingered only long enough to see his commander's face change from an ashen gray to a dull red, and then he left, almost running out into the roaring wind, heedless of the door crashing to at his back. My God, what have I done? he asked himself, vaguely aware that

though the dull ache of his conscience was stilled, in its place lay a heavy and sickening burden of fear.

While St. Clair was scrubbing the mud from Phebe's hands and face up on the hill where the wind was still a song, the Arnolds were reaching a crisis in the long, uneasy war of their marriage. In the log-and-stucco quarters, behind the starched white curtains in Mary Arnold's neat and pleasant bedroom, Henry Arnold strode in feverish, narrowing circles around his wife. "He laughed, do you hear? He laughed! They're all laughing, all of them, and at me! The whole damn post laughing their rotten hearts out . . . at me! God damn you, Mary, I could kill you for this!"

"Oh, for mercy's sake, Harry, calm down! You're jumpy as a cat and make no sense that I can see!" Though her voice was cool, she was not a little frightened. He stamped around so wildly that she could not help being uneasy. His jealousy had been nasty to deal with more than once in the past, but she was aware that never before had he so run amuck.

"Destroy yourself if you must, with your dirty little games of love, but don't take me down with you!"

"Take you down?" she cried, verging suddenly on the hysterical herself, seeing in a cruelly clear vision the years of boredom, the chains she had forged to her own wrists in the mistaken notion of what this man was and would be, only to find herself now hopelessly tied. Ah, it was too much! And she lost her own icy self-control and even her partial fear of him. "Destroy myself? If I did, do you think I'd care? Or care if I dragged you down? My God, you've left me nothing to destroy! You've done all that long ago, thank you! You . . . you with your wild rages and icy ways! Why, you could have been anything, anything . . . a colonel by now, a general soon, if you'd only used your wits and kept your temper. Ah, your temper! Why, you're insane, insane! Don't speak to me of destroying, for it's all you've ever done, all you know how to do! Laughing? Ah, my God, they would have been fools not to have laughed long ago."

"But how and why in God's name did you pick him, a spineless fop, a . . . a coward?" he cried, his voice high and thin with rage.

She laughed. "Do you need a mirror, Harry?" she asked mockingly, bringing herself under control. "So, there is gossip? Well, let

them gossip. Let them say what they please. You are in no position to lecture on the subject to me! And how well I know it!"

"All along you said it was for my sake . . . all along you led me to believe, or tried to, that you entertained him because you thought his father might be of help. But that wasn't true, was it? The ladies of the post are quite correct, and the handsome lieutenant has made his conquest, hasn't he? Hasn't he? By God, answer me!" His voice rose to a shout, almost a howl of despair.

"Mercy, keep your voice down! Those very ladies will be walking into the house any minute," she said coldly.

Perhaps she would have been less reckless if she had not been so thoroughly disturbed by an earlier scene, for not an hour ago St. Clair had stopped by to see her.

"When do you expect Phebe, Mary?" he had asked, and something in his tone and face had given her pause.

"Phebe, Larry? Why, I believe she said she'd be here by three o'clock," she'd replied calmly enough, but sudden dread had turned her cold. Involuntarily, in a voice she tried to keep light and playful, she had added, "What's the matter, Larry, can't you wait until dinner to see her?"

He had smiled, his face lighting. "This may sound like a strange confession to you, Mary, but I hardly can. As a matter of fact, it sounds strange to me! Until the New Year's Ball I'd thought very little about . . . well, about Phebe, nor realized how fond of her I've become. I . . . well, I . . . the truth is, I think I'm in love with the girl!"

"In love? With Phebe?" The shock was so strong that in spite of intuition, she could not keep the shrillness from her voice, nor the sudden rush of color from her cheeks.

In his preoccupation with himself, he did not even notice, but obviously in a hurry, said good-by and went whistling on his way. She should have known, of course, but she hadn't. Life had been too complex, and she too hopeful, to allow insight. She had gone her merry way, only to find herself brought up short, her fancy exploded like a fragile bubble upon a thorn. Since this was gone, nothing really mattered, certainly not anything her husband could say or do. Nor did it do her any good to realize now that she had actually fallen in love with Larry St. Clair at last, nor to reflect that if this had been her feeling half a dozen years ago her whole

life would have been altered. The irony of it was, as she recognized all too clearly, that she had deliberately thrown the two together.

Now she could make no effort to conceal her dislike for her husband, nor to hide her indifference to his rage, and her own anger petered out quickly enough. She had no heart for anger, for much of anything. Aloud she said slowly and dispiritedly, "We're a pair of lost souls, Harry, you and I. You're quite mad, you know, and perhaps I shall soon be." Because she was tired of it, and because she suddenly realized what a fool she had been, she, too, suddenly laughed.

Unable to trust himself, his rage a terrible, smothering thing, drawing tight enough about him to choke his breath and blind his sight, he swung around and rushed out, leaving all the violent words he'd meant to say unsaid. In his own room, sought as a haven, he stood for a long time by the window, half hearing the women's voices as Rachel admitted Mary's guests to the house; for a long time he let his thoughts have their way, even finding a kind of satisfaction in the torment they brought him. Yet, in the end, he tired. Hell, why do I care any more? Because I love her still and have enough love left for jealousy? And that flies in the face of all reason, for all too obviously she has nothing left for me except bitterness. Ah, well, the thing has run its course, and I suppose that she should despise me was the destined end. But they cannot laugh . . . that is too much! They cannot laugh . . . not at me!

In spite of his weariness he began to pace the room again, re-kindling the tiny flame of anger, seeing in his mind's eye the amused faces, the half-hidden smiles, the quick, curious glances of his brother officers, of their wives, and worse still, of the men. No, that he could not stand. He might be at last too weary to care that he had lost love, too weary for shame or for courage before her, but the laughter of the world was beyond bearing, even in exhaustion. He came to stand by the window, and at that moment saw St. Clair and Phebe come riding around the corner of the parade ground.

Coldly he watched as the man dismounted and turned to help the girl down, and the familiar throb of anger swelled with each breath he took. He forgot about Mary, he forgot about Green, he forgot everything except his vision of laughter, of half-hidden and sly amusement, all directed against his own proud armor, and he stood a moment more, watching with savage interest as they talked a

moment, then took the path leading around the quarters toward the kitchen and back entry. Without understanding why they chose this route, he swung blindly around and rushed out into the hall, intent only on intercepting them, wanting suddenly to fling his fury into the handsome, smiling face below. And he burst into the kitchen just as St. Clair began his explanation of Phebe's predicament to the mulatto slave girl.

"Ah!" Arnold cried in a strange, high voice, confronting them so abruptly that St. Clair and Phebe both recoiled a little, taking a backward step, the girl still holding out her muddy skirt, even as the slave girl shrank back in fright against the wall. "You come sneaking into the back door of my home now, eh, you goddam Judas!" Arnold cried, his pale face working, his eyes like dull, burnt-out coals. "You think me too great a fool, St. Clair! By God, if it would not cost me what's left of my career I'd call you out, sir!"

St. Clair stared, while Phebe, stunned by the terrible, strained violence of the man's voice and by the distortion of his facial muscles, retreated even further.

"The whole fort laughs at me, me, the trusting husband, the fool, they think! You know all about it, don't you?" Arnold screamed, advancing upon the younger man until they stood almost toe to toe, an act which in itself heightened his ridiculousness, for St. Clair towered over him by almost a foot. "Yes, you know, and I suppose you've gained your own amusement. I could kill you for that alone, if for nothing else. Not for Mary's sake, God knows, because, you fool, she cares for no man nor ever will, but for my own damn sake! My own!" His voice rose again to a thin scream of sheer rage, like the squeal of a cornered animal.

White-faced, St. Clair tried to silence that savage outburst. "Sir, there's a lady . . ." he stammered, mesmerized by the strange, dead eyes, and unable to remove his own stricken gaze from the other's ravaged face. He was shocked and uncertain, not understanding what was happening, yet feeling a faint stirring of intuitive knowledge brought to partial certainty at the mention of Mary's name.

Arnold stared at him in silence as if digesting what he had said, then slowly turned and looked at Phebe.

"Ah, Miss Tanner," he said, his voice dropping to an almost normal tone. "I am sorry that you are having to witness this little

scene, my dear, but I'm afraid, since it seems that you have lent yourself to this affair, that you, too, must bear some of the consequences. Does it not shame your Quaker faith a bit to play cover for the illicit?"

"I . . . I don't understand thee. . . ." she stammered, frightened.

"Sir!" St. Clair cried hotly, then turned to the girl, "Phebe, please, I think it would be better if you went on to find Mary."

"Yes, I agree," Arnold said coldly, moving to open the door for her. "But before you go, Miss Tanner, let me say that I'm sorry for you, sorry that a mere girl has allowed herself to be mixed up in this sordid business, that she has abetted another woman in betraying her marriage vows."

"Major Arnold!" St. Clair exclaimed, shocked.

Color flamed in the girl's cheeks, she lowered her eyes from the man's steady, icy stare and moved irresolutely toward the door. She was so stunned and frightened by the scene that his words had no meaning, but when she reached the door, she swung back to look at St. Clair's white, shocked face, then at Arnold.

"I lent myself to nothing, nothing!" she cried. "I do not know what thee means! I do not believe what thee says and I . . . I . . ." but she could say nothing more and, turning, ran blindly through the door. Bewildered, thoroughly shaken, she moved numbly along the hall toward the front of the quarters. Ahead, she heard the light voices of women talking, and someone humming, and slowly her mind began to catch and piece together the sum of Arnold's indictment.

Lent myself? she wondered tiredly. What did he mean by that? Did he mean that they are in love and I helped them? Mary and Larry? Ah, it *was* fancy, all fancy. Her heart and pride crumpled slowly, and all the previous happiness of this day lay now like a bitter taste upon her tongue. What a fool I am! she thought. For of course, of course, I should have seen it. Always together, always laughing, always so gay! All along he was only being nice to me, no more than that, a gentleman concerned about two . . . two children he picked up upon the prairie . . . surely he never thought of me as much more than a child . . . he as much as said so . . . while I—I, stupid and silly—thought he might have other feelings . . . And she remembered his words about feeling like an older brother and how angry they had made her, for she had thought them

patronizing then and not at all a part of her own feelings toward him, nor her own dreams. I should have known, she thought wearily, that he meant them for what they were, that it was true and he could feel no more for me than that. She scrubbed at her hot cheeks with her hands, shamed by all that she had ever thought, or wanted, or hoped. And this concern for her own feelings, this blow to her own budding love, drove out of her thoughts, at least temporarily, the magnitude of Arnold's charge that his wife and St. Clair were lovers, and that she had helped them in adultery. She did not think of these things . . . yet.

Her own disillusion was enough, and it carried her past the drawing-room door and out the front door of the quarters. She ran across the grass to the rail where Rob Roy waited patiently by St. Clair's bay mare. With trembling fingers she untied his reins. With a terrible need for haste, glancing fearfully over her shoulder, she put one foot in the stirrup and jumped into the saddle, turning the horse's head even as she gained her seat. Thank God, no one came! She set both heels with such urgency into the flanks of the Morgan that he broke from a standstill into a canter, sending mud clods flying from beneath his hooves. An astonished sentry paused at his post near the magazine to watch her gallop across the Main Parade and disappear around the corner of Bedlam.

TWENTY-SIX

The Kansas conflict was slowly approaching a climax. Men were flocking to their separate banners, proclaiming their allegiance for or against the "peculiar institution" of slavery. God and the Constitution were continually evoked by one side or the other; men searched their souls aloud and took their stands. It was hard to reconcile a Christian outlook with slavery, though political morality could always cover and include strange aberrations from human reasonableness and compassion. It was hard to justify slaveholding with the gentle tenets of Christ, yet many a man of the cloth made the attempt, and many a sincere Christian strove to follow.

It was no wonder that individuals were hard put to stand fast upon their varied faiths, and Phebe Tanner was far from being alone in her confusion. But now Major Arnold's accusation had shocked her into what, as her conscience had been telling her all along, was her proper and more comfortable place. This sharp and severing blow had solved at one stroke the dilemma which had plagued her all these months. Now there would be no more dances, parties, teas, and mild flirtations; the golden dream was over. Mary did not come again to the cabin. There was no note, no explanation,

no word from her or St. Clair, and this silence told her as surely as her own sense of shock that the major's charges held truth.

St. Clair, on his side, was also stunned; anger, incredulity, and shock were as painful to him as they were to her, and to add to the calamity, he was sent early the morning after Arnold's bomb-shell on patrol duty near Lecompton. For a week he worried and chewed over Arnold's accusations, seeing again and again the girl's stricken face just before she fled. He knew that he should have seen her at once or got some message to her, and that every day that passed only made his case more hopeless. How would she ever believe him again, and how could he begin to explain? But he deferred action, busying himself with the normal routine in an effort to control himself at least before his men.

At the end of the interminable week, he returned to the fort, riding in at dawn with his small group of dispirited men, their mission just one more abortive chasing of shadows, hard only in that it kept them in the saddle day and night, but without the stimulus of action, or even any hope of action. The raiding parties of both sides played their cat-and-mouse game, melting into the countryside at the approach of the dragoons and emerging once again to make a strike as soon as the Federals had turned their backs.

Dusty, and weary to the bone, St. Clair made his way to his quarters, wanting only to stretch out upon his bed. But the moment he lay down his mind sprang into action, centering once more upon Phebe and the things he must say and the urgency with which they must be said. His eyes were red and swollen with lack of sleep, his body ached in every joint and muscle, yet he could not sleep. He rose and began to pace the floor.

What shall I do? Go see her? And if she won't even see me or talk to me? And why should she after a week of silence? Well, then, what? Send an apology? Yes, perhaps that was the best way. I could write explaining that I've been at Lecompton, that I was sent there that next morning, and that all I've thought of, dreamed of, wanted since is the chance to explain. Then I could follow it up at once, knowing that at least she understands why I did not come at once. Yet a note, in itself, was no complete solution; that alone would never convince her. He would have to marshal his energies, plan his campaign.

He ceased his feverish pacing, went over to the table, and sat

down, pulling out paper, his aching brain sorting frantically over what he would, what he could say.

My dear Miss Tanner . . . my dear Phebe, I am taking pen in hand to beg your forgiveness and to ask that you grant me the favour of an audience that I may offer the apologies and explanations which are due you, and which I would have tendered at once if I had not been called away to Lecompton early on the morning of the 21st. I will take upon myself the liberty of paying you a call this afternoon at the school, in the hope that this will neither inconvenience nor distress you.
Your friend, Lawrence St. Clair.

He signed it with a flourish, as though to rid himself of the apprehension he felt, then read it over and frowned. Damn it, wasn't that too stiff, too formal? Yet what else was there to say? Nervously he nibbled on the end of his quill and thought. Caught by sudden emotion, he added swiftly beneath his signature, "Please, Phebe, forgive me. It is more important to me than you can know that you not think too harshly of me and that you will allow me the chance to explain! Believe me, there is no truth to Major Arnold's accusations." Again he straightened. Still too damn stiff, he thought unhappily, but, my God, I can't write that I love her yet, not until I get this mess straightened out, not until she can believe me about this thing. No, this cannot be a love letter; I cannot declare myself now.

Unsatisfied, but aware that even this much was better than nothing, he called in a dragoon who was scrubbing the veranda beyond his window and asked the man to deliver the letter to the lady schoolteacher on Shawnee Street in Leavenworth.

"Now, sir?" The bemused soldier turned to stare at the puddles he'd left upon the veranda floor.

"Now, right away, and here's a dollar to make it the quicker! If there's any question here I'll explain that I sent you on another detail."

Comprehension dawned. The trooper dropped his brush, wiped his hands down his pants-leg, seized letter and dollar, and waited only long enough to hear the rest of St. Clair's instructions before he was off. St. Clair sighed and returned to his bed, hoping for sleep, but almost certain that it would not come.

Meanwhile, the week had seemed forever to Phebe Tanner, time

suspended, with nothing, nobody, and she left to heal the wound as best she could. Then, on an afternoon when she had begun to feel that she had at last come to her senses, St. Clair came riding down the street, just as she stood upon the steps to see her pupils start for home. Several girls lingered, giggling, to watch the handsome young dragoon officer in full-dress uniform dismount and tie his horse, while their teacher retired into the classroom in obvious agitation.

"Pheb?"

He mounted the steps, pausing in the door, the light at his back and his face in shadow. He hesitated, seeing that she was gathering up her things in a kind of frightened and desperate haste. She did not look up or turn toward him.

She kept her face averted as she placed the few worn readers and cracked slates upon the shelf. Her hands trembled and her breath came quickly as anger, hope, and hurt warred, sweeping her calm away.

"Please, Pheb. I had to come see you. I . . . I wanted . . ."

"Thee once spoke of chaperones," she interrupted hotly. "Hadn't thee better leave at once before thee compromises me with thy unsavory reputation?"

He winced. "But it isn't true, Pheb, any of it! You've got to believe me. The whole thing is a mistake. I had no idea there was talk of Mary and myself. I was as shocked as . . ."

"No! Thee need not explain. It is no concern of mine. Thee does better to let it lie as thee has done."

He stepped forward into the room but she retreated, still refusing to look at him. He guessed then that she was too angry to heed, that no note or explanation would be of much use.

"All I ask is that you listen to me. Please, Pheb. I admit that I've been a fool, a blind, stupid fool, but in all honesty I did not know the . . . ah . . . gossip, nor that I . . . that I had done anything to cause it." Embarrassment tumbled his words, robbing them of strength, and in his own ears at least, of conviction. He did not know exactly how to plead his case without refuting word for word Major Arnold's absurd and furious charges, and this he knew he could not bring himself to do. How could he say to her, to this mere girl, "I did not commit adultery!" And so he could only say,

"I did not do what they are saying I did," and this, he knew, weakened his denial.

"Oh, I don't want to talk about it, I don't want to hear!" she cried, turning on him furiously, her sense of shock and horror that he could ever have done this thing returning in full measure to mingle with her own shame that she, deluded by fancy, had let herself be so involved. "It does not matter in any case. I am the fool! Thee need not apologize for my stupidity! I have no part of thy kind of life, nor of . . . of Mary's, and I should have known that at the very beginning. Well, I know it now and all too clearly, so go back to the fort, to all those useless soldiers, with their guns good only for killing and never a hand raised toward keeping the peace." In anger and hurt, she confused the two aversions in her mind, lumping them as one.

"But, Phebe, listen, what the major said isn't true! It isn't true! I . . . Mary and I are only old friends. We never . . . I never felt anything more . . ."

But here the sincerity died from his voice as a memory of a younger self, lovelorn and half-grown, revived. Ah, my God, he thought in desperation, how can I explain this? How can I make her believe me? How, now, do I tell her that I love her, love her and only her? Perhaps if he had not suffered so many setbacks in everything he'd done, he might have been able to resolve the whole thing by taking her in his arms then and there and convincing her in what was possibly the only way she might have been persuaded. But he had been wounded too many times, he was far too unsure, though the desire was there, and strong, sparked by the angry flash of her dark-blue eyes and the heightened, lovely color of her cheeks. Still, he could not dare it and so prolonged his torture—and hers.

"How can I make you believe . . ."

"Thee need not bother. I do not want to hear about it. I don't care! I don't care!" she cried, for she had heard the hesitation, and her heart turned cold. All hope died, leaving only anger and pain. "It is none of my business. Only thine and Mary's. Why does thee come now, at this late time? Has thee thought so much over what thee could say? Does thee think that by now I may have forgotten a little? Or that it will all concern me less? No, no, thee need not worry, it has never concerned me, and I know that now. Thee can save thy breath for less dismal chatter. And now," she clutched her

books and brushed past him, pausing at the door to turn back, one hand upon the latch, "and now, if thee will excuse me, please, I wish to lock the door."

"But Phebe, I wrote to . . ." he began, moving obediently through the door.

"I have listened. I've heard all I need or want to hear to know what a fool I've been, and how weak and mistaken!" she cried, turning from the door, the rusty old key in her hand, her face hot with anger. Again she confused her reason, trying to mask her distress behind indignation over this other thing which he represented, or seemed to represent. "Why does thee think it's necessary to put this ungainly old lock upon this door? Why? Because men, armed as thyself," and she glanced down in scorn at the holstered pistol at his belt, "and like thyself, from the South, are ready to smash our benches and burn our books and papers, and perhaps the very school itself. No! I am sick unto death of talk, talk, talk. Thee belongs up there at the fort with thy pro-slavery friends, so little can thee make up thy mind as to the right cause, and I belong here, doing what I can!"

As she spoke, her anger seemed to grow; yet to herself in anguish she thought, ah, if he loved me, wouldn't he say it? Wouldn't he say that above all else? Why tell me of misunderstanding, of Mary? What has that to do with me, if he loved me? No, it is all true, and he loves her, has loved her all along, and he is being only an older brother again, concerned because I left angrily that day and am still upset by what he has done! Ah, I hate him! For if he did deceive Major Arnold, if he did stoop to . . . to illicit love, why then he is capable of all else that has been said of him, and perhaps, after all, these other things are true. Oh, how could he, how could he do it?

Aghast, and close to tears, she rushed away from him, rounding the corner of the building to where Old Maud waited patiently with the wagon. With trembling fingers she worked at the knot in the heavy rope that hitched the old mare to the post.

St. Clair followed, coming up to her as the knot gave way and rope dropped from the mare's thick neck. "Major Arnold is quite mad," he said quietly. "You know that, don't you, Pheb?"

She brought the mare's head around so swiftly that she almost stepped upon his toes.

"Here, let me help you."

But she brushed past him, climbing to the wagon-seat in a swift, lithe movement, and was unwrapping the reins from the battered brake-handle before he could speak again.

"I want no help from thee, Larry. Major Arnold may be mad, and surely he must have been as blind as I, but that is no excuse for thee, or for Mary, or for myself. Thee need not concern thyself any longer. I am grown, I have learned my lesson, and . . . my place!" She brought the reins down with a slight slap on the mare's fat back and moved off, forcing St. Clair to retreat a few steps, the front wheel almost passing across his booted toes. As she drove the mare down the street, forcing her into a trot, Phebe told herself grimly that she was far better off now that this thing had been settled. I want none of them, none of them! she thought bitterly, focusing her attention and her anger on the pistol in St. Clair's belt, the silver saber with its engraved hilt, and thus managing to keep her mind from the dismay in his gray eyes, the tormented twist of his mouth.

Even so, anger was no bulwark, and she wept, knowing that what she wept for had nothing to do with great causes. It served her well and she knew it. She had knowingly made her friends among the military people and had allied herself thereby both with the casual slaughter of Indians to the West and with the pro-slavery elements in the Territory. All this through her love of pleasure, and her love for St. Clair. Love? She had only deceived herself all along, and had been deceived. Well, never again would she be so blind or so gullible, never again let her fancy be so free. Yet, she wept.

The shadows were lengthening across the town, turning the space beneath the wooden, shedlike awnings on one side of the street black and cavernous, while the sun glittered against the arched windows of a new stone building on the opposite side. A group of men, their boots rattling on the sidewalk boards, came down the street. A woman hurried through the dust, bent almost double over a heavy basket of clothes. Three small children squatted in the dirt beside the school, tossing a broken-bladed knife in a shrill game of mumblety-peg.

St. Clair stood beside the school and watched her go, half of him ready to ride after her, to plead to be heard, the other half already too submerged in despair to make the effort, and it was this half

which prevailed. What good would it do? She would not listen, she would not believe him, nor could he summon the energy to try to make her do either. He'd done all that he could, he'd sent the note first to pave the way, so that she would understand why he had not come at once on the heels of Arnold's accusations, but none of it had done any good; she would not listen. He loved her, yes, but he could only conclude that he'd come too late to it. He had, and he knew he had, made the mistake of turning to Mary to find comfort. Perhaps, unconsciously, he'd turned to her for more than comfort. He wasn't sure. It was hard to be certain about anything he did any more.

Utterly discouraged, he turned and saw a disheveled soldier weaving his way slowly toward him in the exact center of the street, his horse's reins looped negligently over one shoulder. The man was whistling cheerfully as he placed one foot with exaggerated care in front of the other. St. Clair stared at him—drunk before pay day?—he looked again at his face and remembered it. This was the soldier he had dispatched to Phebe! His heart leapt, he took three steps forward, caught the dragoon by the shoulder, and spun him around to face him. Here was his messenger and in his grimy pocket the letter to Phebe!

TWENTY-SEVEN

The farther up the valley Philip Maxwell rode, the more uncertain he became. It seemed to him he shed his strength the minute he turned into the rutted Lawrence road, and by the time he reached a certain grove of cottonwoods he was weak with nervousness and totally unsure of himself. When he came in sight of the Tanner cabin, his hands were trembling, his mouth was dry, and he could not think of a thing to say beyond an initial "Howdy, ma'am!" However, a stubborn courage kept him riding. He would soon be dismounting by the shed, tying his horse to the fence, turning to face the door, and then mounting the narrow path to knock upon it, his heart in his face.

Many times she had met him so, opening the door wide with a smile, recognizing at once his shyness and discomfort, and doing her best to put him at ease, even though it was often difficult to keep a straight face. There was much that was both ridiculous and pathetic about this sturdy man—his hot and earnest face, the "Howdy, ma'am" in a tight, suffocated voice, the manner in which he thrust forward some present or other with hands which shook eloquently. Yet there was nothing either ridiculous or pathetic

about his courting. She actually found his intensity more than a little frightening. His hard young mouth, clean-cut and square, held back the words of passion, but their force was there in his clear blue gaze, and doubly so in his broad body, held so rigidly and with such care in her presence, lest he make some awkward, unaccountable slip.

These days, when she thought of him, Phebe was uncertain. She had been deeply hurt, and all her emotions were confused. She knew only that she liked him and was always glad to see him come. She was fond of him, she loved to tease him as she teased Jen, and, in fact, her affection for him was similar to her love for her young brother. She did nothing to hurt him, and she tried to spare his feelings in many small ways, but beyond this and beyond being uneasy before his obvious fervor, she had not thought a great deal about the matter until the afternoon Major Arnold had confronted St. Clair. She realized then that she could count only on this.

So matters stood this late day in May as he came riding up the Lawrence road, his usual easy posture in the saddle marred by a huge smoked ham he carried under one arm. He was in full uniform, although he had only an afternoon pass, and it was obvious that he had spruced up with great care. At first he rode contentedly, his anticipation tinged with pleasure, for the day was soft with spring sun and new grass, and the wind gentle enough to match his mood. Subtly his comfort fled him as he approached the cabin; he grew aware of the incongruity of the bulky ham beneath his arm, with its redolent odor and the grease coming through the paper he had wrapped it in. He wondered how he was to present it to her decently; it was such an awkward and messy gift. I reckon, at that, he thought ruefully, it ain't the proper thing to bring a lady. Still, it's a damn fine ham! If I wouldn't go and make such a monkey of myself, I could bring it off and she'd be glad to have it, too!

For a brief moment he even considered dumping the thing, but there was the cabin up ahead, he'd brought it this far, and his native stubbornness would take it the rest of the way. Reluctantly he dismounted at the shed, tying his horse as he had many times before, this time a bit hampered by his burden. When he turned toward the cabin, she was standing in the path just outside the open door, smiling down at him. He had to move toward her, conscious every step of the way of her eyes upon him, and aware of the

picture he cut. He felt, rather than saw, the rise of her eyebrows as she caught sight of the bundle tucked beneath his arm, and he felt himself beginning to grow warm. If he had had the slightest inkling of how glad she was to see him, he would have forgotten himself, the ham, everything, to run those last few yards. At the sight of Maxwell's horse on the road she had even run out to meet him, happy in the knowledge that for an hour or two she could forget both pain and loneliness, and restore her wounded ego a little because this man cared so much.

Since he had no hint of this, he stumbled up the path in torture, and since there was nothing else to do, thrust out his ungainly gift, murmuring dispiritedly, "Howdy, ma'am. Ah . . . a man was through the fort this morning with hams and . . . I . . . uh . . . I heard they was supposed to be pretty fine . . . and I . . . I figured to bring you one." His eyes roved everywhere in their journey to avoid hers; sweat beaded his forehead, for the effort he was making was worse than heavy labor in the sun.

"Why, Philip," she cried in genuine delight, "how sweet of thee to think of us! Oh, how marvelous! It's been months, months since I've tasted ham!"

His heart lifted at the note of pleasure in her voice. If only giving gifts were not so damn painful he'd literally shower her with 'em! Now, grinning, he held out the ham, hardly seeing its untidy wrapping nor feeling its weight. She held out her arms to receive it, but when he let go, staggered back against the door jamb beneath the weight. Aghast, he retrieved the ham, snatching at it hurriedly, almost dropping it, his face brick-red with renewed embarrassment.

"No. It's too heavy for you!" he cried.

"Well, I . . . I surely do thank thee, Philip," she gasped, trying to control a dreadful urge to laugh. The image of herself going down beneath this huge chunk of meat was grotesque, and she had to turn quickly and lead the way inside to hide her mirth. By the time he had set the ham upon the table, she had regained her composure and could turn back to him once more. Oh, dear, she thought, it always is so funny. For once, though, no thought of contrast between his lack of grace and St. Clair's easy manner leapt to her mind. "Do sit down, Philip. Will thee have some coffee?"

"I can't stay very long," he said, as he never failed to say, and took the proffered chair, placing his shako in his lap. "We're off to

Lawrence again in the morning. Seems like they can't leave them poor devils over there in peace. They act like it was them committed a crime when they let the Missouri men burn their town down! It don't make sense to me, and I've had about all I can stomach. I reckon I'll be glad enough to quit when my enlistment's up!"

"What are the dragoons to do in Lawrence this time?"

"I reckon we're supposed to look for that John Brown fellow. I know the major was mad enough to chew Indians when he heard about the Pottawatomie Creek business, though I figure it's tit for tat like, what with Lawrence being burned."

"Ah, but Philip, that was a terrible thing! Five men killed in cold blood and so mutilated! No, there is no excuse for that, and no tit for tat ever did anyone's cause good in the end. Thee knows violence only breeds violence," she replied in a troubled voice. Ah, she thought with some bitterness, why have I let myself become so involved with these army men? These are so far from Quakers in thought and belief that I cannot possible comprehend their morality. With a pang, she thought of St. Clair, then resolutely pushed him from her mind.

"I reckon old Brown is bound and determined to run the slavery men out of Kansas," Maxwell replied. "I reckon he figures they ain't going to go 'less someone makes 'em."

"Because his cause may be just does not give him the right to take human life, and so wantonly! I really think that he must be mad, for only a madman could kill as he did!" She found his uncompromising attitude just a little unpleasant and her anger began to rise.

"I wouldn't con . . . condone the way he did it," he said uneasily, aware that she was upset by the incident—a night raid on a small settlement along the Pottawatomie Creek, in which five pro-slavery settlers were called from their homes and slaughtered with hatchets and specially-constructed short swords. On more than one of the bodies the hands had been severed in a sort of ritualistic sign, intended, it was supposed, to warn all like-minded men. Two of them had been young boys, slain along with their father. "I reckon the old man figured he could scare off the Regulators by spilling a little blood. They been riding roughshod over the Free-Soil squatters out that way."

"But, Philip, the men he chose to murder may have been sympathetic to slavery in Kansas but they weren't Regulators, I hear, nor Law and Order men. I was told they had never lifted a finger against their Free-Soil neighbors, but had, on the contrary, helped them when the Regulators did come raiding. No, no, to kill is only madness, and to kill in cold blood like that is the ultimate sin!" Her pronouncement was so fierce that his jaw dropped a little and he recoiled.

"Well, I reckon I ain't heard the whole story," he said, trying to back water. "I sure don't hold with murdering folks."

His intention was so plain that she relented. After all, he'd been born and bred in these hard lines, he'd never really known, as . . . as Larry had, a civilizing influence. So she smiled, replying mildly, "Then thee had best wait a bit before thee sides with John Brown! It would be embarrassing to find thyself arguing for a madman! Please, do have some coffee. It's strong, but the bean was fresh."

"It's very good," he muttered, disturbed at being so gently chided and wanting to resent it as coming from a woman, a mere girl, yet not daring quite to show it, and even enjoying it obscurely. "Where's Jen?" he asked after a moment, thinking it best to change the subject.

"Jen is out earning our daily bread today," she replied, joining him at the table. "Does thee know, Philip, that all on his own he has gotten a job? He has hired out to Mr. Miles, the lawyer, to help copy deeds and wills and such legal matters. I am to drive into town to fetch him shortly. Rob Roy took a rock in his hoof only yesterday and is lame, so that I must use Old Maud in the wagon. Jen could not take her himself, for now that he is a working man I must deliver the milk, and then I finished up my work at the school this morning."

"He's a fine lad, Jen. Almost a man now," he replied, but his mind was not on this. "There is no more school, then?"

"No, not until next fall, if it ever will reopen. Poor Mr. Wills has been so threatened, and then three weeks ago they beat him quite badly, and it has disheartened him so that I believe he may intend to leave Leavenworth. Jen had this in mind when he went seeking a job. We were not sure what we should do if the school did not reopen and I . . ." her voice trailed off and she looked hastily away, startled by the sudden light in his eyes. Oh, dear, she thought, con-

fused and uneasy, why did I mention this? He acts as if he were going to . . . to declare himself, and then what shall I do? I don't know . . . I don't know.

It was the chance all right, the one he'd been waiting for, and Maxwell was determined not to lose it. Words came tumbling from his lips without coherence or sequence; he wanted only to get it said, to lay his heart before her and to rest, free at last to know his fate.

"But that's all right . . . might be just all right," he cried, "for my enlistment's up this summer, the first day of August, and I thought, I was . . . I ain't going to sign up again. There's homestead land I figured to take up that ain't far from here. Mr. Russell, he asked me did I want to be wagon-boss for him and I reckon I could do worse, what with the good pay and the time I'd have winters to build a cabin when he don't have freight to be moved. I figured . . . I been wanting to ask you . . . I sort of planned maybe we could . . ." and there he stuck, with only a fleeting wonder to hear himself so fervently pledge his future and his freedom.

Phebe stared down at her hands, her dark-blue eyes troubled. Nervously she bit her lip, and for the life of her could think of nothing to say. She could find no way to answer what he was so desperately trying to ask her, and she did not want to hurt him. There he was, his feelings naked upon his face, all but pleading with her, this big, strong, and silent man. With him, there was no doubt, nor ever would be. She had his love and had it entirely and forever. Not like the other, she thought sadly, not at all like him. And her own love? Where was it now? She didn't know.

Gathering herself with effort, she said as gently as she could, "Philip, I feel that thee wants to . . . to say something serious to me, but before thee has said it I should . . . I must tell thee something. I am happy here. I love to have thee come, for I enjoy thy company more than I can say, but I . . . I would not like to think of the future yet. Perhaps that is the best way to say it, although I am not even certain of this much. Thee must not think that I am not fond of thee, for I am . . . very much, and I am very grateful for thy thoughts of me, but thee must know that I cannot find it in my heart yet to . . . to . . ." and here she, too, stumbled and stopped. She could not bring herself to say "marry" for, after all, he had not said it, and while she knew that he meant just that, still it would

have shamed her to say it. If it were not said, if she could remain ambiguous, she would not be so likely to hurt him.

To her astonishment he jumped from his chair, his face wild with delight. Seizing her by the arms, he pulled her up and hard against him. She could feel the trembling of his body, the quickened beat of his heart, and his arms felt like a trap of steel around her.

"Philip!" she cried, frightened, for no man had ever held her so.

"My God, Phebe . . . darling," he muttered against her cheek.

"My God, I love you!"

"Philip! Let me go at once!" Fear was plain in her voice and she began to struggle a little, pushing at his arms. Aghast, his face flaming, he released her.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry as I can be," he said in a low voice. "I reckon I kind of lost my head, but I . . ." He stooped to retrieve his shako, which had fallen to the floor, and lowered his eyes to the golden plume as he smoothed it with shaking fingers. "I reckon I ain't so awfully sorry at that," he continued with a sigh. "I been wanting to kiss you for a long time, like I been wanting you for my wife. I want you right now like blazes, but I reckon I can wait, if you want it that way. I can wait till hell freezes over if I got to. I ain't never wanted any woman for wife before, but when I came up on you out yonder, I knew right then you were the one I had to have. I ain't ashamed to say it, and I ain't ashamed to want to hold and kiss you neither!" He raised his eyes defiantly, taking a step forward, his voice and face no longer abashed but suddenly bold.

She backed away hastily, but smiled, deeply touched. "Thee frightened me a little, Philip. Thee is impetuous, as Jen is always saying to me, but I am very flattered that thee says this, and I would like to say that I . . . that we . . . but I cannot in clear conscience. I don't know. I need time to think about all that thee has said." She turned away from him, unable to bear the look of mingled joy, disappointment, and hope upon his face. With all her heart she hoped that she was not misleading him.

"Then I will say no more about it now," he replied slowly, "but you cannot expect me to keep silent long. This is too . . . too strong for me and I have . . . waited, Phebe."

"Yes, I understand," she said gently. "I will think of all that thee

has said, and I will talk to thee soon again. But come, it's time that I went into Leavenworth for Jen."

She had put him off for a little longer, but she knew that it could not be indefinitely, and that one way or another, she would have to make up her mind, and soon. She knew that it was not fair to keep his hope alive if she had no intention at all of marrying him, and yet, she did not honestly know whether she wished to or not, for she had never known love, she had no real idea of what love could be. Was it love to care for someone who obviously did not return one's affection? Or was that really a kind of self-pity? She did not know. She knew only that she was fond of Philip, that she thought him kind, if not exactly gentle, that she liked his company and felt at home with him, though she did not find him exciting. Still, his very evident desire stirred her senses and made her pleasantly, if timidly, aware of herself as a woman. When she was lonely, it was well enough to be able to think of him, knowing that his heart was there for her alone. Yet she hesitated, not sure that this was love, feeling a faint doubt and a sensation of emptiness as if something were missing. Was not love more exciting? Would not love take one's breath away?

Doubt or no, she must make up her mind; she must decide, and soon.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Leavenworth was in turmoil that afternoon; news of the Pottawatomie Creek massacre had spread through the town and surrounding countryside, including Weston across the river in Missouri, and starting at dawn, the Blue Lodge men, the Regulators, the Law and Order men had come pouring into town. The bars and gambling houses on Water Street along the levee were doing a thriving business; liquor ran freely, sparking talk of violence in answer to violence, and by afternoon the pro-slavery crowds were in an ugly mood.

"Best hurry and get Jen out of this," Maxwell said with a worried frown as he guided Old Maud through the aimless, drunken throng of men wandering about the streets. He drew up beside a cottonwood-shingled building housing several law offices and wrapped the reins about the brake-handle.

Phebe nodded absently, bemused by the excitement of the town. These men spilling from the saloons and blind pigs of the levee and Shawnee Street were familiar enough. Outsiders! she thought bitterly, remembering the mob that had come in from the streets to threaten Mr. Wills in the school. Outsiders come to make trouble,

finding violence and excitement easier than tilling the soil. No wonder the Quakers do not hold with agitating, even with preaching their faith, she thought. Was Larry right when he said that if people were left in peace, if there were no agitation, no stirring up of either side, they would solve their problems eventually, and without bloodshed? Yet without agitation would anything ever change? The thought of St. Clair was like a sickening wrench through her body, and she was glad to be diverted by the sight of a man catching his boot-heel in a break in the wooden sidewalk. He fell flat, much to the loud amusement of his comrades.

"Drums!" Maxwell exclaimed suddenly, pausing as he threw his leg over the wheel. He stared up the street, startled.

"Drums?"

"I reckon that's what it is," he said, standing on the wheel, looking over the heads of the men swarming out from under the wooden awnings into the street. She heard them then, approaching rapidly beyond the buildings. A moment later a large body of men came marching around the corner of a big frame building decorated with the legend, "Kansas Dental Depot." They came in a straggling, semi-military formation with guns on their shoulders, preceded by a pair of drummers and a flag neither she nor Maxwell could identify.

He stared as they came up the street and grinned broadly. "Jehoshaphat! If that ain't some army!" he exclaimed loudly.

"Shhh," she warned, plucking at his sleeve. Several faces turned in their direction, and one large man in a rust-colored shirt, with pistol and knife stuck nakedly in his belt, scowled fiercely and took a step toward them. Her heart began to beat hard against her ribs and her fingers tightened on Maxwell's sleeve.

"Listen here, soldier," the big man shouted, pausing beside the wagon, deliberately sending a stream of brown juice against the wheel, "listen, them's Carolinians, that's who them is, and if you want to make smart cracks about 'em, whyn't you be man enough to move on down the street there and speak up to Major Buford? He can give you a right proper answer, I reckon!" He spread his boots wide in the dust and tilted his hat back to stare up at Maxwell, who stood with one boot on the wheel, one on the wagon floorboards. Several of the bystanders guffawed, and Phebe shivered at that harsh and raucous sound.

Maxwell moved the toe of his heavy boot so that it extended from the rim of the wheel to within inches of the man's chest. He stared down coolly into the other's hot eyes, then grinned in derision. "That major and that army you're speaking of seem kind of busy rounding up women and children and old fellows. Reckon I'll wait till they're done with their nursery chores."

"Now, listen here, soldier," the big man began angrily, shifting his weight so that the toe of Maxwell's boot wasn't aimed so directly at his neck and chin. But the latter spat suddenly, and the small blob of spittle made a crater in the dust between the big man's feet.

"Move on, mister," Maxwell said savagely, shifting the weight of the heavy Colt on his thigh and meeting the other's scowl with an icy-blue stare. For a moment there was silence. The men beginning to drift farther down the street to watch the Carolinians stopped in their tracks and turned back, waiting tensely. Frightened, Phebe gazed about, seeking a friendly face. I cannot sit here and watch him be killed, she thought wildly. I shall scream . . . And she felt as if she actually had opened her mouth to cry into the strained stillness when abruptly the big man swung away from the wagon, muttering but downed. Beside her, Maxwell's body relaxed; he sat down quietly and laughed.

"Oh!" she gasped, trying to catch her breath.

He sobered at once. "I'm sorry, ma'am . . . ah, Phebe. I shouldn't have called him like that. You might have been hurt. I reckon I got mad and just didn't think!"

"Please don't apologize, Philip. I was frightened, but I . . . I'm proud that thee stood up to that bully!"

He flushed but his gaze met hers, and she was the first to look away from the naked longing there.

"We should get Jen . . ." she began, when she was distracted again. Down the street, the Carolinians broke into two sections, herding a struggling group of men, women, and children between them. Most of these were afoot and burdened by bundles of hastily gathered belongings. A few led a horse or a cow, sorry-looking animals not worth pressing, and two wagons came along in the rear. "Mercy!" Phebe cried in distress. "What are they doing to those poor people? Oh, Philip, what are they doing?"

He replied soothingly, "I reckon they've rounded up a bunch of

Free-Soil squatters and aim to send them on back down the river. They won't hurt 'em none."

"But what are they doing with those men over there?" she cried as another band of the strange militia rounded the corner of the Dental Depot, led by another pair of drummers. Before them they drove a dozen or so men, and there was something so grim and purposeful about the way they pushed their prisoners along that the crowd began to shout and shove and jostle, moving in close on either side of the uneven column, running along to keep step with it as it came up the street.

"You boys gonna hang them nigger-lovers?"

"It's a rope party! Damned if it ain't a rope party!"

"Naw, they're going to shoot the bastards! That there's a firing squad, them fellows out in front!"

As the Carolinians marched past the wagon, the mob streaming on either side, Phebe caught a glimpse of the white faces of the men they herded before them, and with frightened comprehension she heard the rising hysteria of the crowd baying like wild dogs at their heels.

"Philip," she whispered, feeling sick.

With a smothered oath he began to climb from the wagon.

"No! Thee will be too late! Take the wagon. I can hold Old Maud if thee goes."

The prisoners were already being lined up in a large vacant lot beyond Mr. Dustin's fish shop, and the front row of the militia had moved apart and were busy seeing to their guns, checking the loading, while the mob pushed and milled and screamed about them. That they were a firing squad and preparing themselves to act as one was evident.

Without arguing, Maxwell whipped up the mare, sending her charging down the street and into the edge of the milling crowd. Here he pulled up, handed Phebe the reins, set his shako on the wagon seat, and jumped out over the wheel to head straight for the militia. She sat numbly, seeing the bright-red hair bob through the thickest part of the melee, the sergeant's powerful shoulders lunging forward, bowling men backwards, sending more than one to his knees. He did not hesitate, she thought, he did not hesitate even a fraction of a second.

The next few moments were hopelessly confused. She lost sight

of him, he seemed swallowed up by the surging mass, and she was left alone with the mob's obscenities and hysterical cries for blood ringing in her ears. She saw in their faces all the evil and stupidity man was heir to through his thousands of years upon the earth. Her soul quivered before the stench-ridden breath of hate; she had never seen anything so hideous in her life; she had never known that human features could become so monstrous, the open mouths distorted, the eyes distended and avid with greed for vicarious death, the clenched and wildly waving fists like so many ghastly claws reaching for flesh.

She shuddered and closed her eyes.

From somewhere behind her a voice began to roar against the tide, a huge bull-voice that gradually drowned out the fanatical shouting, silencing some as it advanced slowly toward the center. She opened her eyes as a horseman, followed by several others, pushed his way past the wagon. He was spurring his horse purposefully toward the Carolinians, shouting as he went, and as the crowd recognized him for a man who wielded considerable influence and respect throughout Missouri and the Territory, they drew back to let him pass, and quieted until his voice could be heard, demanding over the hush, "What in hell is going on here? What do you men think you're doing? Who's your leader here?"

In the disorganized militia a man stepped forward from his fellows.

The "general," the courtesy title bestowed upon him in a strictly civilian sense, like other military titles sprinkled liberally throughout both pro-slavery and Free-Soil forces in Kansas, leaned from his saddle, and the fierce bellow carried to the furthestmost edges of the crowd. "All right, mister, please have the goodness to tell me what's happening here? I see that you have gathered Leavenworth's businessmen and some of our most respected civic leaders. Now, then, what were you proposing to do with these men?"

A voice from the crowd shouted, "Spill a little blood, General!" and laughter followed in scattered sections, easing the tension. But for the most part the mob had fallen silent and seemed to wait with strained attention, as though suddenly brought up short, indecisive now, and given to second thought.

"Well, we ain't had time to draw straws yet, General," the militia leader drawled, raising his voice to be sure that he, too, was heard,

"but we figured to get rid of these Abolitionist murderers in one way or t'other. I reckon we hadn't aimed to get right fancy about how we was to do it."

His words were greeted by a scattered roar of approval. A good number of the milling mob began to whistle and stamp and surge forward, leaving the drunker members to hang, stupefied, like millstones around each other's necks. Grinning, the Carolinian leader swung in a half-bow, like an actor acknowledging his applause.

"Don't be stupid, mister!" the "general" snorted, eying the crowd coldly. "Do you want to bring the dragoons down on us?"

"We're empowered, General. We're a duly constituted posse."

He snorted again, his indignation impressive. "Constituted by whom? No, sir, this won't do. You march those men back double-quick! You can jail 'em and try 'em, but by God, you can't murder 'em in cold blood!" He swung his horse around on its haunches, knocking aside more than one man. Arrogantly he held up, his back not quite turned on the so-called posse, and waited.

The Carolinian was plainly undecided. He stood trying to make up his mind, his expression a little worried. The crowd, too, grew strained and uncertain, and several groups along the fringes broke away suddenly and hurried off, as if to wash their hands of the whole affair. The men of the "firing squad" ceased fussing over their weapons and looked at each other apprehensively. The "general's" *Murder 'em in cold blood!* had brought them up short, and the shock of it, like a douse of ice water, left them stunned.

The minutes passed, minutes which must have seemed like hours to the white-faced prisoners hemmed in by the mob, on whose faces could be read the changing emotions of savage glee, hatred, apprehension, and, slowly, a sullen withdrawal into indifference. The Carolinian leader sensed all this, and making up his mind at last, he turned to his followers, shouting orders. There was a murmur of mingled relief and disappointment as the strange militia gathered itself, about-faced, and marched back up the street the way it had come, the drums silent now. The "general" sat his horse, quietly watching, and after the mob had thinned and the militia had disappeared around the corner, he too rode off, followed by his retinue. The remaining men scattered quickly, as though suddenly ashamed to be seen together. Voices rose again, some in complaint,

but many made sober and uneasy by this thing they had almost done.

Maxwell returned to the wagon, but instead of climbing back onto the seat went to the tailgate and untied his horse. Leading him, he came back to stand by the wheel, looking up anxiously, his face grave, all the anger and excitement gone.

"If you'll be all right, you and Jen, I reckon I'd better get on to the fort as fast as I can and let the colonel know what's going on here today. I heard in the crowd that they'd taken Mr. Robinson off the boat, and if that news gets around much, there's likely to be worse trouble yet! I reckon," he added carefully, "I'd best hurry."

"Oh, yes, thee must!" she cried. She knew as well as he did that if this mob could get its collective hands on Charles Robinson, leader of the Free-Soil people, even the "general" could not keep them from spilling his blood. "There is Jen now, up the street and looking for me. We will go home at once, so thee need not worry. Thee must go quickly."

He turned. "I reckon I'd best. If . . . if I made you angry or distressed you earlier, I'm sure sorry, but I ain't a bit sorry I said what I did because I been meaning to say it for a long time now. I reckon I had to say it!" he blurted out, and turning away quickly, swung into the saddle and sent his horse off at a canter.

TWENTY-NINE

The woods trail wound along the ridge, lying like a dark stream beneath the moon-bright trees. Leaves shivered at the touch of the night wind, and small branches cracked beneath the hooves of the trotting horse. High on the side of a hill, St. Clair came out into an open meadow, and looking back, saw the Missouri make its great, shining curve away toward the northwest. Before him, Sentinel Hill loomed darkly, while beyond, the country lay bright and rolling, dark patches here and there where trees the color of tarnished silver were set like shadows on the moon-white open prairie.

It was late, too late really to be riding on a call, but the talk St. Clair had overheard not half an hour ago was urgent enough to set aside the social amenities, and so he urged his horse along at a brisk trot, grateful to have the moon to light his way. What in God's name was she up to? he wondered. How had she let herself be talked into such a risky adventure? In spite of his anxiety, he smiled, knowing well enough how she had. Ah, the stubborn way of the gentle! But would she not be shocked to know that her name had been mentioned in a saloon? For that matter, would his having

been there to hear it be one more to list in the catalogue of his sins? No doubt, but perhaps this one time his sins were useful; perhaps even a good stiff drink of whisky had its place in the scheme of things. This, though, he did not expect her to believe, and he smiled again, thinking that if it weren't for the fortifying effect of this same whisky he might never have summoned the courage to be riding out to the valley, no matter how urgent the reason. He'd seen enough of her temper to have developed a healthy respect for it, and the coldness in her voice and eyes that afternoon at the school had left its mark. The memory of it now sobered him. Angry and shocked as she was, would she listen to him or believe him even now? How was he to make her realize the danger she was in?

The whisky he had downed in a saloon in Weston, in the company of Bill Price and another young lieutenant named Anderson. The three had gone over earlier in the evening, drawn out by the beauty and restlessness of the spring night. They'd walked down the bluff to the flats, to take the small ferry which operated just above the fort. In high good spirits they'd chaffed the ferryman, a small, gnarled old man for whom life was one long, drawn-out complaint, and each passing day a variation on the theme of tragedy. Tonight he had not disappointed them.

"Gentlemen," he'd begun as soon as he'd pushed the scow from the bank, thus making certain of his audience, "gentlemen, I'm here to tell you that my wife's got the ague, and she's got it this day so bad that she damn near shakes the cabin down! I swear it! Now, what you gentlemen got to say to that? Why, I tell you she took it so hard this spring, she sprung the shingles and I been a-patching and a-patching ever since! Why, she shakes so hard she shook herself plumb through the ropes o' the bed, and there she be, a-sitting on the floor, shaking the whole damn cabin like it was the earth quaking and shivering. At that, she's pretty stout, my wife is."

"I've heard it said that she makes three of you!" Price returned, and the ferryman grinned proudly.

"It's only when she gets the ague that it ain't so handy. You gentlemen best watch yourselves over here tonight. Plenty doing! Plenty! Ain't no place for soldiers tonight, but I reckon there ain't a bit of use telling you that no more'n there was to tell the rest of 'em I been carrying over. When they wants their whisky they goes to find it, no matter. So I tells 'em, like I tell you now, just keep

your head low when the shooting starts, for there'll be shooting. There always is when them no-good, hot-blooded fellows get to town! They can't move without all them bowie knives and pistols hitched to their belts. Best advice a man could take is stay out of town. . . ."

Weston was noisy and turbulent, filled with wandering dragoons touched by the spring and unhappy to be still at the fort rather than riding far to the West on summer patrol, chase, and escort duty. For some reason, on this night, a large group of young civilians were also roaming the streets, moving from saloon to saloon with much the same purposeless restlessness as the soldiers. Their voices were loud, their laughter harsh and obscene. The three young officers felt the tension immediately and exchanged glances.

"Is this for us, men?" Price asked.

St. Clair shrugged. "The Cottonwood is usually pretty quiet, Bill, and the whisky's one degree less foul. Why don't we give it a try? We can always go home."

The Cottonwood had not been quiet and the whisky had been raw, foul stuff, watered with the muddy Missouri, but still potent. The small saloon was crowded with civilians and a few dragoons, and they had not been there five minutes before St. Clair had heard the talk which had sent him on his present errand. Six men had been ranged along the bar to his left, young men for the most part, and well-armed. Though they had eyed the officers belligerently when they'd come up, they'd not bothered to lower their voices nor alter their talk. Why should they? No one feared the dragoons!

The voices went on, a constant rumble in St. Clair's left ear as he leaned his elbows on the counter. "Whisky, neat!" Bill Price said to the sullen barkeep moving down toward them, the dull light from an overhead lamp turning his face greasy with gathered sweat. St. Clair shifted his stance a little, trying to dim the loud boasting on his left of night rides, barns burnt, fences cut.

"Well, how about them out there in the valley and along Salt Creek?" one man asked loudly.

"In good time, in good time, Ed. Hell, we know plenty of 'em over here in Missouri. Why, Platte County's got its own renegades, and don't think it don't!"

"Why didn't you come to Captain's Ellis' dinner, Larry? It was a pretty good party as they go," Price asked St. Clair.

"Why? Because I was eating dust out near Lecompton, Bill."

"Look," the rough voice on the left interposed, "there's more'n one helping them damn niggers get away! There has to be or they never would get so damned far so damned fast!"

"Well, we're going after 'em, ain't we? I reckon we know who they is by now, that lawyer in Leavenworth and them two preachers, them folks on Shawnee . . ."

Two men surged into the saloon, laughing loudly, noisily slapping their thighs, and their laughter and shouts momentarily silenced the others. St. Clair, who'd just begun to get the gist of the talk beside him, frowned in annoyance. He thought he'd heard someone mention "schoolmarm" and it had caught his attention. Meanwhile, on his right, Price had launched into an involved story of Captain Ellis' dinner party at the Planters' House. It was rather funny, and he ended it with an excellent mimicry of a fatuous senior officer famous for his rhetorical manner of speaking. In the middle of and punctuating his friend's chatter, St. Clair heard one of the harsh voices say, "Tanner's the name . . . Just her and the boy . . ."

He stiffened, straining every muscle to hear, ignoring Price, who was crestfallen to find only Anderson greeting his sally with laughter.

"What's the matter, Larry? This stuff knock you witless?" he demanded, piqued.

"They be hiding niggers for old man Wills just as sure as I'm standing here. . . . We ain't so dumb and we're gonna . . ." and the rest was hopelessly lost in the rising medley of voices and laughter.

"Look, I've got to apologize, Bill, Andy. I'm going back. I . . . I forgot something. . . . I'll look in on you boys later, all right?" and he left them as abruptly as that. He hadn't given much thought at first to what he intended to do. It had seemed simple enough then. But now as he turned his horse onto the Fort Riley road, it occurred to him that Phebe and Jen might well be asleep, and he quailed before the thought of waking them. Then, too, he knew he was going to have difficulty getting her even to listen to him. Damn that foolish Wills! A man who'd barely missed a coat of tar and feathers and whose school had been almost burned to the ground should have gained some wisdom. It was all right and fine to be a hero, but to involve a mere girl in a thing like this was senseless!

Men like Mr. Wills, he thought, are impractical dreamers, innocents in a clashing world, men who always underestimate violence. And, he added grimly, who are always surprised by their martyrdom. Perhaps he would have recognized this as an admirable trait if it had not concerned the Tanners.

To his relief he saw a light burning in the cabin, and not to alarm them, he tied his horse at the end of the lane and walked up the hill, his boots noiseless in the powdered dust. He was thankful that he'd left his spurs and saber behind. Did I do that purposely, he wondered, knowing how she detests military hardware? If he had not been so tense and uneasy, the thought might have amused him, but already the sweat was gathering in the palms of his hands and his heart beat nervously. In all probability, this was his last opportunity to set things right, and the fear of spoiling this almost God-given chance was very strong. There was no doubt in his mind, though, that she was in very real danger, and with each step he took he grew more certain that he would have to phrase his warning carefully, divorced enough from his own feelings for her so that she would listen and believe. I suppose, he thought uneasily, I'd better not even attempt an explanation or apologies this time, but come straight to the point before she has time to doubt me.

A dog began to bark inside the cabin, interrupting his thoughts, and he paused uncertainly on the path. Had they a dog now because night riders had been here before? he wondered, and was sickened a little at the idea. As he moved forward again he noted with some relief that the high, excited pitch of the barking was that of a young dog, perhaps no more than a puppy. Inside the cabin, the light was abruptly extinguished, and a second later he heard the creak of the bar being raised. Because his own eyes were well accustomed to the night, he saw the shadowy figure in the doorway at once.

"Don't be frightened," he called. "It's St. Clair."

There was silence, and he took several more steps forward before Jen's scornful voice replied, bringing him to a halt again. "Thee need not worry, Lieutenant, we're not frightened!" The boy half turned back into the cabin. St. Clair could hear the brief murmur of voices; then Jen spoke up again, stooping to hold the dog as it writhed and whined in a frenzy of eagerness to greet, if not to attack, the visitor. "Thee had best leave as stealthily as thee came, Lieutenant, for Pheb does not wish to see thee!"

"Look, Jen, I must see her. It's urgent that I talk to her."

"I doubt that she believes so, Lieutenant," the boy replied indifferently. "Here, Buff, back inside." He shoved the dog into the cabin with his foot, withdrawing a step himself.

"Wait, Jen! Listen, I heard tonight that you and your sister were keeping runaway slaves here. I heard enough to know that it's no secret that you're helping Mr. Wills hide fugitives."

The closing door was arrested, and Jen turned back even as Phebe appeared at his shoulder. "Never mind, Jen. I heard Lieutenant St. Clair. If thee'll please relight the lamp, I will talk to him a moment."

"Aw, it's just another story, Pheb. . . ." Reluctantly, the boy moved away.

"Is it, Larry?" she demanded coldly.

At the sight of her, St. Clair's heart leapt, a wave of sheer happiness surged over him. He knew it as foolish, he knew he had no cause for hope, he knew his joy a transient thing; nevertheless, he was absurdly happy. On sudden inspiration, and forgetting his resolve, he pulled the crumpled letter from his pocket and held it out to her, thankful now that he'd retrieved it from his drunken messenger.

"What?" she began, but he broke in quickly. "Please, read it, Pheb."

She looked down at the letter in her hand, then with a doubtful glance at St. Clair, withdrew a little from the door, and while he waited, listening to the frogs singing by the creek and the thump of his own heart, she read it. It seemed to him a long, long time, but it was only the space of a minute before she was on the path beside him, saying in a troubled voice, "Will thee walk a little, Larry?"

He sighed, his relief so great that for a moment he could not speak. Silently he offered his arm.

"What does thee have to tell me about Mr. Wills and . . . and runaway slaves?"

"I . . . well, not an hour ago," he began rather stiffly, "I overheard a group of Missouri men in a tavern in Weston discussing runaway slaves. They seemed to know that people across the river were helping the Negroes to escape, and they mentioned several

names, among which were Mr. Wills's and . . . yours. They spoke as if they had plans to move against all of you soon."

"And thee has ridden all the way out here at this late hour to tell us?" Her voice softened perceptibly. Why should I not believe him? she thought. Surely, he is sincere in his concern, and surely, I know enough of Major Arnold's strangeness to doubt the truth of what he alleged. Why, perhaps, Larry cares a little, after all. . . .

As she turned toward him, he saw the faint hope cross her face. She was so close that he could feel the stir of her breath. The moonlight turned her skin to marble and evoked bright stars of reflection in her eyes. Deeply moved, he stopped on the path and caught her arm.

"Pheb, couldn't you and Jen move into town, or even come up to the fort? You're in danger out here until this whole business is settled in one way or another. I . . . I can't stand by and watch you play with fire this way!" He was so stirred by her nearness that he found it difficult to concentrate on what he was saying.

She moved a little, restlessly, fighting down disappointment. Oh, dear, she thought, is this all his visit and his letter are to mean? That he is only concerned as our "older brother" again? Aloud, she replied impatiently, "Please, Larry, I really do not want to go over all this again. Jen and I are happy here, and we are not afraid of the Regulators, nor do I think they will war against women. And as for Mr. Wills and . . ."

"But, Pheb . . ." he interrupted, remembering again his resolve to warn her without allowing his own feelings to intrude, "if you *are* helping slaves to escape, then this is plain foolhardy! Mr. Wills has no right to implicate you in such a business! In some places it's a matter for lynching, not to mention the fact that it's breaking the law, and that most judges in this region would be only too glad to impose a stiff jail sentence."

She stared up in disbelief, jarred by the practical, authoritative tone. No, she must not let herself be deluded by fancy again. He was only feeling responsible for her and Jen. "Breaking the law, Larry?" she asked coolly.

"Yes, the Fugitive Slave Law. Surely, you know that it's been pressed pretty harshly throughout the country?"

"And if the law required that thee slit the throat of every third man that thee met, thee would do so, Larry?"

"No, no, you misunderstand me, Pheb. I don't mean to argue the merits or lack of merits of the law, I only want to point out that Mr. Wills had no right to involve you in this thing. I don't think he could have understood what it might mean for you, and Jen. Perhaps he doesn't take these Regulators seriously, or perhaps he simply didn't think very much about it, for if he had, surely he wouldn't have let you . . ."

"Let?" she interrupted hotly. "Let? Does thee think me not capable of doing something and deciding something myself? I must be let, then, like a mere infant in arms, a child, allowed or coerced to this or that? Does thee think that I have no mind of my own? Does thee think I cannot do what I believe is right? If I desire to be foolhardy, as thee puts it, if I desire to break a law made by misguided men, does thee not think me adult enough, or reasonable enough, or intelligent enough to do so on my own decision and with full knowledge of what I am about? Obviously, thee does not! Do not judge so by thyself, Larry! If thee has no conscience to instruct thee when a law is wrong and inhuman, when a . . . a certain honor is involved, that does not mean that all others are as poor in spirit, nor will they stand and wait as thee cautions!"

He winced, but continued stubbornly, all caution flown to the winds, his own need to make himself understood to this girl coming to the fore. "Breaking a law works both ways, Pheb, and if you can feel that you can break it with impunity, standing first and foremost upon the needs of your conscience, then the Missouri men can feel much the same way, and the law is broken on both sides, with poor results to everyone." And he added, falling back upon his lawyer's training, "To get rid of a law, one must use the law." He made a final effort to gather his thoughts, to speak plainly and urgently, to return to his original intention of warning her, but he was completely distracted—she was too close, his own thoughts were in turmoil, he only knew that he wanted her.

"Oh," she cried angrily. "Is thee sure that thee is not so much concerned for our welfare as for the value of the slaves we have helped escape? Is thee sure that thee does not wish to assist thy Southern friends by trying to scare us, Jen and me, that we may cease helping them?"

"Pheb!" For the first time in their relationship he was angry. He

had come that far from indifference and lethargy to be unwilling to absorb this without striking a blow in self-defense. "What do you wish of me? That I kill every Regulator and Blue Lodge man I come across? Do you think that an answer for me? Is it one you yourself would recommend? I see no other way, except the law and time and cold reason, and that does not seem to satisfy you after all. You surely understand that as an army officer I cannot actively help slaves escape, for I would be breaking my oath and the law of the land. I cannot meddle in civilian political concerns, I am delegated only to protect civilians against the common enemy, and who or what that is is beyond my right to decide. What would you have me do, then? Leave the army, take up a gun and join your side, to ride at night, burning, killing, as John Brown has done? Would God be pleased to have me his avenging angel to shoot down all who are pro-slavery, and would you really think that this was right?"

"No . . . no, only that thee sometimes says . . . that thee would *feel* what is right," she replied miserably, shaken by his fierce retort. "Thee cannot kill any more than I, but surely thee . . . thee can decide what thee is and say so. I don't even care half so much that thee . . . might be for slavery, as that thee seems for . . . nothing. Like . . . like the wind, thee is always changing."

He stared down into her face, thinking that she was lovely, and he was appalled that he had struck back so bluntly, for anger now seemed remote before the power of his desire. I must be careful, he told himself desperately. I must not intrude myself or she will not believe that there is danger. Yet helpless to stop himself, he found he had taken a forward step, had raised his arm, and with that step all good intentions were drowned in an overwhelming rush of passion. His kiss was gentle at first, then increasingly insistent. He felt the startled rigidity of her body, but to his utter surprise and joy, she yielded suddenly in complete response to his own desire. It was only a second, a tick of the clock, but it was meaningful enough to wrench Phebe, shaken, from his arms and to send her running for the cabin in confusion, to slam the door upon him, the moon, the night. Numbed, he turned slowly and walked down to his horse, not at all sure whether this had been a beginning or an end for them.

THIRTY

When a new outburst of trouble developed near Blackjack, K and G Troops made a night march to Hardteville to join Colonel Sumner's forces there. Low clouds obscured the stars, while mist lay in winding streamers across the prairie, rising from hollows like windy ghosts and leaving its mark of gray-white fog-dew across the grass. The dragoons rode slowly, feeling their way along the road, grateful for the coolness of the night, but cursing its opacity.

Nothing is ever perfect in a soldier's life, St. Clair thought as he rode behind the vague black blur of Captain Green. Freeze or roast, stumble about in the dark or go blind with the glare of the sun; it always came in pairs, one to the good, one to the bad.

The June night was soft and pleasant, the rhythm of his horse beneath him soothing, and the night wind stirring coolly against his skin sent a stab of longing through him. He stirred restlessly in the saddle, thinking of Phebe, wondering whether she had believed him last night, whether she had really met him halfway in that kiss—or was he only deluding himself?—and almost as important, whether he had convinced her of her danger. When he returned from this mission he would have to try once more to persuade her to come to the fort for safety.

A dozen yards ahead, Major Arnold cursed suddenly. "Be quiet, you goddam fools!"

A dragoon coughed again, choking on the sound, and the major cried passionately, "Shut that man up if you have to ram a saber down his throat!"

Yes, but this other affair, St. Clair thought nervously. How do I lay its ghost? I wonder what he would do if I were to say to him: Look here, it's all a misunderstanding. I'm sorry if I gave you cause for any such idea. I was blind, I didn't realize. Mary was . . . only lonely, and we never thought how the thing would look. We grew up together and we . . . No, he decided, moving his shoulders uneasily, it wouldn't work. There was no room for sweet reason. Arnold had his own theory and was hanging onto it grimly like a damn bulldog. He'd never let go because he was . . . what? Mad?

St. Clair hadn't seen Mary Arnold since that day the major had confronted him in the kitchen of the Arnold quarters, and he had met the major only on the remote and cold plane of duty, but to his relief and surprise, he found that his feelings about the man had crystallized at last. His own self-confidence had recovered in direct relation to his discernment of the other, for as long as he had admired Arnold as an officer he'd been blind to him as a man, and his own self-doubt had grown. Arnold's irrational fury had lifted that blind. Slowly, he'd come to the conclusion that Bill Price was right: the man was insane. More than that, his friend might very well be right about the rest of it.

Ahead in the column, Captain Green ventured timidly, "I suppose Colonel Sumner will be in Hardteville by now, Major?"

"He should be, Captain, but that doesn't mean he is," Arnold replied coldly.

My God, what an icy soul, thought St. Clair, shivering. How can he care enough even for Mary when he seems so utterly incapable of any human relationship worthy of the name? The night seemed to close in, smothering the thud of hooves, the jingle of bits and spurs, the creak of leather, leaving only the lonely song of the wind, blowing out of the vast darkness stretching away to immense distances on either side of the narrow road. That song seemed a long, long sigh from the emptiness of endless prairie, and he felt lonely and trapped, caught in a web of unreality, each fiber spun

from a lie. He wished he had packed a bottle of whisky in his saddle roll or turned a little into his canteen.

I should have been a mountain man or a Plains Indian, he thought, and perhaps he might have appreciated the irony if he'd known that Arnold had once shared the same desire. Life might not be comfortable, but surely it would be free, and a man's choices so narrowed that there could be little of this constant struggle of decision. He recalled briefly a man named Peter Bright, a friend of Sergeant Maxwell's, whom he'd met the spring before at Laramie, a tall, silent man with clear green eyes, who'd lived with a Blackfoot tribe, with a Blackfoot wife and their two small boys. Bright was the only mountain man he'd ever met to talk to and he'd been intrigued, imagining the kind of a life this could be. Bright had lived it among his Indian companions for ten years. His home was a buffalo-hide tepee; he drifted with the tribe from summer camps to winter villages, from one hunting ground to another, spending his days either in the chase or calmly beside his fire. Was this a leisurely, contemplative life, St. Clair had wondered, or so slow and monotonous that a man sank into apathy and inertia? And was it really free? Did a man turn his back upon his own civilization out of weakness or strength? He doubted that even Bright knew the answers. Yet he'd made his choice, and a clear one at that. He'd shifted from white man to Indian, had changed status and way of life.

But how could a man be so sure of what he wants? It still amazed him that men like Sergeant Maxwell and Major Arnold could be so sure of who they were and what they would do in every circumstance. He marveled that generals could make decisions which meant life or death to other men, that statesmen could change the course of nations and the lives of millions. Men like this, he thought, must either have a terrible courage or be completely blind, for he could not see how they could be so certain of their right. Surely they could not perceive fault on both sides of a question, even though no man and no idea was ever perfect; yet there were men like this and their decisions were made and carried out without hesitation. While I, he thought ruefully, do not even know whether this is strength, or weakness.

A shot split the dark night ahead and the wind carried it and its echo to the advancing dragoons.

"Detail, halt!" Arnold shouted, and waited impatiently for the shuffle and jingle to cease as the column of horses was reined to a standstill. The drumbeat of approaching hooves came clearly on the wind, and in a quieter voice he gave the order for the men to divide, each section taking a side of the road. The troopers split quickly, officers and noncoms hurrying them with curt commands, pushing more than one man and his mount bodily into the ditch. Within two minutes there was not a dragoon on the road, only the vague black shadows waiting silently in the grass. Within another moment or two their patience was rewarded, as horses and riders came galloping into their midst with no suspicion that they were there.

"Halt!" Arnold shouted, excitement warming his voice. "Halt, or we fire!"

Horses and men tangled and jostled as the dragoons closed on the road, trying to seize bridles and weapons and bring the newcomers to a halt. Several shots were fired, although no one cried out, and only a horse trumpeted in fear. The major repeatedly called for a light, until a corporal produced a lantern he carried on his saddle, lit it, and held it high. More than one dragoon found himself holding a comrade's bridle, pointing his Colt at the other's chest, and sheepishly they let go, holstering their weapons. Within their circle, however, they had trapped half a dozen men, civilians armed with pistols, and one with a Sharps rifle across his pommel.

"Bring the prisoners forward," Major Arnold commanded sharply. He swung from the saddle and stood in the road in the lantern light, waiting impatiently for the dragoons to sort themselves out. After a moment or two, the dismounted civilians were shoved into the circle of light. He examined them, his cold eyes suspicious and angry, noting the pistols in their belts, the bowie knives strapped against their thighs. "Who in hell are you men and what are you doing on the roads, armed and mounted, at this time of night?"

A big, strapping, dark-haired young civilian in a blue wool shirt and worn trousers tucked into boots stepped forward, grinning. "For a moment, Captain, I thought we'd been ambushed! Sure glad to see it's just you soldiers instead of a bunch of Regulators!"

"It's *Major*, mister! I asked you who you were and what you were doing, nothing more!" Arnold snapped.

The young man's face sobered a little, but his relief was obvi-

ously too great for him to take the officer seriously. "Well, now, no need to get touchy, Captain. We're riding on home from a meeting, and as far as I know I reckon there ain't no law against that. I'm Tom Satler, this here is George Hardy, this here is Martin . . ."

"Free-Soil?" Arnold cut him off brusquely.

"Why, sure, Captain, and mighty proud of it," the civilian replied, smiling again, but this time his grin was tinged with contempt.

"That's what I thought. All right, what were you doing? Robbing? Raiding?"

The young civilian rolled his tongue around his mouth thoughtfully, then spat into the road, cleared his throat, and finally, in a voice of exaggerated patience, said, "I'll tell you again, Captain. We're riding home from a meeting. That's all. If there's a law again' it then it's sure enough a bogus law and don't hold none for us."

"Just riding, you say? With those Colts in your belts? Who fired that shot up ahead?"

"That were you, weren't it, Sam?"

A second civilian nodded, cautiously. "I figured I got my cartridges wet crossing the creek so I figured it wouldn't hurt none to see. They ain't wet."

"Well, Captain, we're enjoying this little chat and all that, but we got to get us on home or our wives will begin to worry and lay up some scolding for us. Been nice meeting all you soldiers. Like I say, it's a hell of a lot better than coming on a bunch of Regulators!" The big young man turned on his bootheels, surveying the silent dragoons with a grin. He even made a move to pass through them to his horse, when Arnold recovered himself, shouting, "You're under arrest, mister! Corporal, have these men tied to their saddles. Mount up, the rest of you."

The young Free-Soiler swung around, his grin vanished. "What? Arrest? What for, Captain? Now look here, you can't do that! We ain't done nothing. Damn it, we got wives and kids waiting on us. . . ." He began to struggle as two dragoons closed in on him. "Listen, they'll worry if we don't show up. They'll think the Regulators got us. You can't . . ."

"Shut up, you!" Arnold rounded on him viciously, one hand falling to the butt of his pistol. "You . . . you speak when you're spoken to, you goddam nigger-loving bastard! All right, tie their hands and be quick about it, you men. Put a gag in their mouths! We've wasted enough time here."

The dragoons obeyed swiftly and the now-silent prisoners were mounted, and herded along at the center of the column as it started out once more down the road, this time at a brisk trot. Several horses stumbled badly in the darkness, but Arnold kept the pace, peering eagerly ahead, hoping to take another band of Free-Soilers by surprise. He cared little whether his own horse fell, for rage was upon him again, sparked by the insolence of the young settler, and he began to nurse his fury until it rose like a thick, opaque curtain across his brain. All the real and fancied wrongs of a lifetime welled up inside him, wrongs over which he brooded so absolutely that everything else was tinged by it. The insolence of the young civilian was the insolence of his wife's lover, and of his wife, who denied that she had taken him for a lover, and then said in the end, her voice thick with fury, "All right, and if I have, and if we are lovers, what of it? What concern of yours, you drunken fool?" Ah, he thought, I will kill him! I will kill him! And the images of civilian and young officer fused in his brain. In this mood of steadily mounting fury he paid no attention to the flickering light from campfires ahead, but charged on at the head of the column until the challenge of a sentry caught him up like a blow across the face.

"Halt! Who goes?"

He hauled in his horse, replying in a tight, thin voice, "What's this?"

Hearing the sound of his voice, St. Clair's uneasiness grew, and he checked his own horse well behind the major's.

"Halt!" the sentry repeated stolidly, and the soldiers could hear the click of his carbine lock.

"Dragoons, you fool! K and G companies commanded by Major Arnold. Let us pass, damn it!" Arnold shouted, spurring his horse past the sentry, all but riding the man down before he could reply or acknowledge. He rode on into the camp, unmindful of the men lying wrapped in their bedrolls near the fires. He rode straight

through the sprawled figures, and St. Clair knew it a miracle that no one was trampled.

At the Headquarters tent, Arnold dismounted stiffly, threw his reins to his orderly, and ordering his officer to follow, stalked into the big tent. His whole enraged being was in rebellion, for on top of everything else he must now face Colonel Sumner and serve directly under his command, the same Colonel Sumner who had all but ruined him the year before. This was the ultimate humiliation, and he came into Headquarters sullenly, his rage alive in his thin, dead-white face.

Colonel Sumner rose from a field table set beneath a lantern hanging in the tent's center and turned to greet the newcomers. "Good evening, Major," he said coolly. "Evening, Captain, gentlemen. Come right on in. I want you to meet these two gentlemen here, Mr. Wilson, who's the spokesman for the Missouri group, and Mr. Wood of the Free-Soil militia. These are some of my officers. This isn't all, is it, Major?"

"No, sir. I believe Captain Darby with G Troop has fallen behind. I expect they'll be in shortly, sir."

"We won't wait for them, Major. Now, then, gentlemen, if you will all please move in a little closer, here. That's better." The colonel searched his pockets absently, drew out a gigantic old briar pipe with the comment that anyone who wished to might smoke, and began to fill the huge bowl, tamping down the tobacco firmly with a scarred thumb. "Now, then," he began again, and paused deliberately, pulling on his pipe, while he eyed them over its grimy rim. He tasted the smoke with his tongue, then let it drift leisurely away between his lips.

Arnold shifted his weight impatiently, tugged nervously at his mustache. By God, would the old fool ever get to the point!

"You all know, as I know, that if at all possible we want to call a halt to this entire matter. It is not getting anyone anywhere, neither you, Mr. Wilson, nor you, Mr. Wood. You, Mr. Wilson, have no authority from the Territory to have men under arms, and you, Mr. Wood, are considered to be in rebellion against the laws of the United States. Therefore, neither of you gentlemen is in the right, and I, as an officer of the United States Army, am here to mediate your points of difference. More than that, I am here to command you to cease hostilities, to lay down your arms, to disperse." Again

he paused, drawing on his pipe, his eyes resting reflectively, now on the face of one, then the other. When he continued, his voice had lost its abstracted quality and had taken on force and authority.

"You will understand that I am giving you a direct order from the Governor, gentlemen. You are to disperse your men at once, they are to put up their arms, return home, and stop this marauding! Mr. Wood, I am authorized to release all Free-Soil prisoners at Lecompton, and will do so as soon as I obtain your word that you will comply with the Governor's order. Mr. Wilson, I am in turn authorized to arrest you if you choose not to obey this command. I have the warrant, so there need be no question of legality. Now, then, gentlemen, that is the way the cards are stacked for you both. Are we to be reasonable men? Or am I to use my dragoons?"

Sam Wood grinned. "Well, Colonel, all I can say is that your pistol seems to be loaded and the priming shows! I'm perfectly willing to disarm and disperse, if Mr. Wilson agrees to do the same. Of course, if he is to regroup . . ." He left the rest unsaid.

The colonel nodded. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Sam," he commented, then turned to the other civilian. "And you, sir?"

"You're sure of your orders, Colonel?"

"They're in writing. You may see them. Lieutenant Albright, those papers, please. Here you are, gentlemen." He handed them about and waited patiently while Wilson glanced through them. Wood merely ran his eyes over them before handing them to his opposite number. He was wholly satisfied with the mission. Besides, he had absolute faith in Colonel Sumner.

"Yes, those certainly are your orders, Colonel," Wilson said finally, shoving them negligently across the table. He glanced obliquely at Major Arnold, whom he knew quite well, and rose, making a little bow toward Sumner. "Not much doubt about your authority, or your orders, Colonel, though I can't say that I like them. I will disperse my men in the morning, if that will be soon enough."

The colonel nodded, rising. "That will do. My men will oversee events, gentlemen. More coffee? No? Well, then, we'll go to work on this first thing in the morning. I want to thank you both for your cooperation, and express the hope that this will be the start

on a peaceful settlement of all your differences. Good night, Mr. Wood, Mr. Wilson." He walked to the tent entrance to see the two men out, then returned to his seat and his warming pipe. The canvas had barely closed upon the two civilians when four more dragoon officers entered, led by Captain Darby, G Troop commander.

"Sorry if we're late, sir," he apologized breathlessly.

Arnold frowned, opening his mouth to speak, but the colonel smiled, saying quickly, "Not too late, Darby, though you just missed meeting two fire-eating captains of the damnedest militia it's ever been my misfortune to see! I'll wager no two of their men is armed the same. Well, let's hope this is all there'll be to the battle of Blackjack. Now, then, will you gentlemen join me in some more coffee?"

Arnold started to rise, even as the others acquiesced gratefully. The colonel gave him a quick, cool stare. "Just a minute, Major. We're not done here yet. I'm aware that you've all had a hard ride, but if you'll excuse the trespass on your time, I wish to sketch some of the details which must be attended to in the morning, and to give you your assignments. Thank you."

Arnold sat down again quietly. The orderly returned with a tray of tin mugs, which were accepted by everyone but Arnold. He sat dourly withdrawn, his thin face set like a petulant child's in an expression of exaggerated patience.

"Now, then, Darby," the colonel began briskly, ignoring him, "you will take G Troop over to Mr. Wilson's Regulators to see that they carry out my orders down to the last detail. I want you to split your men into platoons, each under a noncom or officer, and follow these men on home, even if it means trailing them into Missouri. I want to be certain that they leave the Territory and actually disperse. Captain Green, you'll do the same with K Troop, to see that Wood's men follow through. Major Arnold, you will take a small detail to Lecompton, with a note to Major Hardesty there to release the prisoners he holds, and to return all arms and equipment claimed by them and certified not stolen from the government. Be sure their horses are returned. Well, if we carry this out successfully, I think we will have taken care of the governor's problem. At least for the moment. I am under no illusions that this

will establish a permanent dispersal or disarmament. Any questions, gentlemen?"

Errand boy! Arnold thought. Errand boy with a major's commission! He began to tremble. He rose, bade the colonel good night in a voice that could scarcely be heard, and left the tent without a glance or a word for the others.

THIRTY-ONE

When the meeting in the colonel's tent broke up at last, Bill Price joined St. Clair and they walked off together in the darkness to locate their men and their own wall-tents.

"Did you see his face?" Price asked when they were well away from their comrades.

"The major's?"

"Yes. I guess taking a message to Major Hardesty wasn't much to his liking. As it is, he and the colonel don't exactly see eye to eye! I imagine this was damn near the last straw."

St. Clair laughed, and was a little startled at finding himself amused. "That's an understatement if I ever heard one, Bill. He hates the colonel. I understand he feels the Old Man is the cause for all his troubles, going all the way back to Bird's court-martial. That's not all, though. He has other reasons for his anger. He was in a towering rage earlier. One of the civilians we took prisoner on the way in talked up to him, and you know how he'd take that!"

"Prisoners? You picked up prisoners?"

"Half a dozen of them. Didn't you people hear the shot and general scramble?"

"No. We got left behind pretty badly. Darby was scared to hurry and scared not to, poor devil. It was so damned dark we settled it for him and took our own good time. You people in K seemed to be in a devil of a hurry."

"The major was. I don't know why, exactly. Perhaps he hoped there would be trouble and wanted to be sure of getting here in time to get into it. It's a wonder a horse didn't go down."

"It is," Price returned dryly. "I expect the major figured if he got here soon enough and couldn't find any trouble, he sure could make some!"

St. Clair grinned in the darkness. "That, and the chance to pick up more prisoners, Bill. Having to release the ones he did manage to lay hands on isn't going to help his spleen any!"

After a moment Price said, "Strange he didn't mention them to the colonel. You'd have thought he would have brought them up when the release of prisoners was mentioned."

They walked on in silence for a few minutes, peering, among the campfires and the dark groups of troopers settling themselves for the night, for their own men. Price stopped short suddenly, turning toward his companion so abruptly that St. Clair went on a step or two before he realized that he was walking away from him. "Larry," Price said soberly, "if the major had it in for one of those fellows you don't suppose he'd . . . well . . . do anything rash, do you? Listen, hadn't we better speak to someone?"

"Well, damn it, Bill, Captain Green didn't speak up. Anyway, to whom else could we mention it but Green?"

Price moved again, rejoining him. "We could . . . go over his head, but it certainly isn't done, and wouldn't be likely to endear either of us to the major. It's Green's job all right, I guess, but you know yourself, Larry, that Green is so afraid of him he practically pukes in his presence. Have you noticed lately how he changes color, red, white, and blue, whenever Arnold speaks to him?"

"You think, then, we should go back and mention it to Colonel Sumner?" St. Clair half turned, but the light had already been extinguished in the colonel's tent. He remembered the weariness in the older man's face.

"I don't know, Larry. I hate to . . ." Price, too, swung around to look back. "Well, maybe that settles it."

"I'll do it if you think it needs doing. K Troop's my outfit, Bill.

No need to implicate you." In spite of himself, a thin note of anxiety had crept into his voice. God, how he hated to hear it there!

To his relief, his friend replied, though his voice was slow and doubtful still, "I guess you'd better let it lie, Larry. Of all people in this man's army, you'd better not be the one to go over the major's head to report something he neglected to mention! Especially to the colonel! No, you've had enough trouble with that bastard Arnold! It would be foolish to risk any more. Maybe you, or even better, I, could find a way to bring it up casually in the morning where Colonel Sumner could hear about it. I suppose it's all right for tonight; there's only the risk of his damn rages, and the fact nobody, not even an angel, can tell what he might do when he's in a fury. . . ."

The edge of doubt was very plain in Price's voice, and he showed his reluctance to dismiss the matter so easily, but St. Clair was too relieved to heed. Hell, he thought, I am in no position to say anything. I've got to stay out of the man's way. I've got to keep from doing anything to bring his attention to me, if I can, and Bill would be the first to say so if he knew the way things really are and what Arnold thinks I've done. No, better to let Bill bring it up tomorrow. A night under guard might cool the ardor of those lads for night-riding and pistol-packing.

And they left it there, arriving a few minutes later at their respective bivouacs. They bade each other good night, and each dismissed the problem in his own way, only to wake in the morning to find, as is so often the case, that tomorrow was too late.

A little before midnight a shot had rung out, echoing through the quiet camp, yet disturbing few, since more than one sentry on night bivouac fired into the shadows or touched his well-primed trigger accidentally as he marched his post. This time, however, the colonel was awakened. He immediately summoned the sergeant-of-the-guard, who informed him regretfully that yes, it was true, one of the prisoners had been shot while attempting to escape.

"Prisoners? What prisoners?" the colonel had demanded, bewildered, half asleep still but visibly disturbed.

"Why, sir, the prisoners Major Arnold brought in this evening."

"What!" the colonel shouted. "My God, man, we're not taking prisoners! Much less holding them! Much less shooting them! I

gave no orders to arrest anyone, or to hold anyone! And you stand there telling me you just shot a man in cold blood! You were the one that shot him? What's his condition?"

"Yes, sir, I was just posting the guard when it happened. He's dead, sir," the sergeant replied soberly, his broad, florid face heavy with regret. If the colonel had been more wide-awake he might possibly have noticed the strange, satisfied gleam in the man's cold eyes, for the sergeant was from Georgia, and had just completed a pleasant and patriotic duty. A nigger-loving Yankee would mind his own damned business from now on! And the whole thing was doubly enjoyable because he was in no way accountable for it. Just as the major said, he thought, wanting to grin but keeping tight rein on his delight. He stood at attention, waiting, solemn and disturbed, the picture of a man who had done his duty, however unpleasant.

"My God," the colonel cried furiously, "I ought to have you arrested! Of all the damned idiocy! Shooting an unarmed man! There's little enough excuse for this, since we were not to take prisoners unless hostilities broke out. Jesus, Sergeant, what a mess you've made of things!" He began to pace the tent in agitation. What would Sam Wood do when he heard this? Break his agreement to disperse? Wouldn't blame the man if he did! How would the Free-Soil people in general take a thing like this, the news that the dragoons had shot down one of their men, taken prisoner when neither side had fired a shot, and after they'd already agreed to disperse. And that agreement made only a few hours before! he thought, dismayed. God damn that Arnold! Prisoners! He *would* be the one to take prisoners. Couldn't those fools in Washington see how dangerous the man was?

"All right, Sergeant," he said, turning back to the waiting soldier. "Report to Captain Green. Tell him that I've relieved you from duty and placed you under quarters-arrest until I can look more fully into this matter. I suppose you only did your duty as you saw it, but believe me, I shall investigate the whole affair thoroughly. Dismissed!"

"Yes, sir. Good night, sir." The sergeant saluted, about-faced, and departed, a worried frown gathering on his broad forehead. This hadn't gone exactly as the major said it would after all. Bejesus! he thought, has the old man got the wind up? I was just doing my

duty, warn't I? I was sergeant-of-the-guard, warn't I? He was anxious nonetheless, and would be far more so before the affair was over.

By morning the news was all over the dragoon camp. St. Clair heard it from his orderly and, stricken, sent the man out to find out which prisoner had been shot. He was not surprised when the orderly returned with the word that it had been the big, dark-haired young civilian who had run afoul of the major, and it left him to contemplate the fact of murder. He did not even need to know, although he knew well enough, who the sergeant-of-the-guard was, nor that he had served many years under Arnold, nor that he was from the South and violently anti-Yankee, having been involved in several vicious brawls with Northern soldiers in the taverns of Weston and Leavenworth. It was plain murder, and he, St. Clair, had allowed it to happen. . . . My God, he thought, tormented, why didn't I act last night, why didn't I tell someone as Bill suggested? Yet, he knew that he had not because it would have meant more trouble, it would have given Arnold a thoroughly legitimate chance at him, if he had gone over his and Green's heads to the colonel, and if he had stopped at Green, the end would have been the same. It had not been his place to move, it had not been up to him to bring up the matter of prisoners, but all along he knew that he should have. Like Price, he had suspected something like this would happen. Now that it had, he knew plainly his own guilt in the matter. The self-respect and renewed confidence he'd been able to regain since Christmas evaporated. The only thing left to him was the stark knowledge of what Arnold was capable of. Price was right, the man was a monster.

As for Arnold himself, he appeared at breakfast unperturbed and serene, and completely capable of joining the conversation revolving around the unfortunate incident.

"I heard the old man was worried that it might break up our whole mission here," one officer said. "He was afraid that the Free-Soil people might go back on their promise to go home."

"Oh, I doubt it's likely to affect the negotiations one way or another," Arnold put in coolly. "It's just one of those things. The man was brought in for suspicious conduct, he tries to escape in the night, and gets shot by his guard. I doubt the Free-Soil people can make anything out of that! I trust the colonel won't be so nervous about his council here that he places blame on the soldier who fired

the shot. After all, the man was only doing his duty as required by the manual. Now, if I could have gotten a word in last night, I intended to mention that we'd brought in prisoners, but the colonel held the floor and I had no chance. I suppose, actually, the fault lies with me, if it lies anywhere."

Eyes met along the board table, but the major blandly sipped his coffee and ignored the questioning stares, the slight, almost invisible shrugs. Several officers murmured in belated and halfhearted agreement, and after this the talk turned to other things; the incident was abruptly dropped.

Farther down the table, near the end, St. Clair's guilt-haunted glance met Price's incredulous stare, and it seemed to him the latter's lips moved, shaping an unheard whisper, "Look out!"

THIRTY-TWO

As the spring grew to summer a rash of semi-meaningless violence erupted from one end of the Territory to the other and killing became wanton. In Leavenworth, the Regulators doubled their efforts to rid the countryside of Free-Soil settlers, rounding them up by the hundreds to force them on the steamboats going down to St. Louis, and those allowed to salvage even a part of their possessions were lucky. In a bar along the levee, an unsavory character named Fugit bet six dollars against a pair of boots that he would have the scalp of an Abolitionist within two hours, and his companions, intrigued by the novelty of his boast, took his bet and waited until he returned with his bloody prize. Shortly afterward the Regulators killed William Philips, a young Leavenworth lawyer, when he defended his home from their attack. Only the year before, pro-slavery men had tarred and feathered him in Weston and had a Negro sell him for a dollar at auction.

The dragoons were kept busy chasing Jim Lane, the Free-Soil "general," and his followers through Kansas and Nebraska, and almost but not quite catching up with him. Rumors kept coming back like insistent whispers: Jim Lane and fifteen hundred men

were about to attack Leavenworth; Jim Lane had been taken prisoner by the troops; the dragoons were going to hang him; the new governor had arrived; had not arrived; Governor Shannon was dead. Meanwhile, Fort Leavenworth was filled to the bursting point with frightened civilians seeking shelter, Free-Soil people burned out of their homes by the Regulators and other pro-slavery raiding bands, and pro-slavery folk fleeing the rumors of Jim Lane. In isolated brawls, in struggles to defend their lives and homes, men killed each other, and violence was everywhere and unavoidable.

As to many another, violence descended upon the Tanners, coming only a few days after St. Clair's night visit. Perhaps, if Phebe had not been so disturbed by the other conflicts evoked, she might have heeded his warning, but as it was she gave no further thought to that aspect of his coming. So violence came one sunny summer afternoon when there was no threat in the empty valley with its wind-stirred grasses and sleeping groves of cottonwood.

Phebe had just taken fresh milk, butter, and bread to the loft to the lone young Negro girl hidden there, for through all the raids and rumors, the Reverend Wills had managed to bring an occasional runaway to the valley. There had not been many during the long winter and spring, but lately the numbers had swelled, further incensing the Missouri raiders.

Jen was down by the creek mending the fences of the cow lot when Buff, the pup Philip Maxwell had given him, began to bark, then ran toward the road. The boy looked up in time to see two horsemen pause just outside the lane, their heads turned toward the cabin. Something about their indolent slouch in the saddle, the slant of their battered hats pulled low over their foreheads, disturbed him, and this vague uneasiness increased suddenly as they pulled their horses over and started up the lane toward the cabin. He dropped his shovel and moved across the meadow to intercept them before they reached the shed. The slighter of the two men reined up in the shade of a cottonwood and turned sideways in the saddle to watch the boy's approach. His companion, a short, bulky man, went on a few feet, then turned back, passing into the tree's shadow so that Jen could see neither man clearly, only their waiting forms as he walked across the bright, long-shadowed field. His uneasiness gave way suddenly to fear. Reluctantly he kept moving, whistling the dog back to him, for the pup was racing in excited

circles about the horses, and one picked up a restive hind-leg, laid its ears back, and waited for a chance to kick.

When he had gained the dark shade of the cottonwood, Jen could see the two men clearly, recognizing one, the slighter man, as the leader of the four who had invaded Mr. Knox's store earlier in the spring. Regulators! A tiny shiver ran down his backbone, but he gazed up at the men steadily enough, returning their indolent stare. The second man was heavy-faced and burly of body, and sat his horse awkwardly, like a farmer more used to a wagon. Both men were heavily armed, with long coiled ropes at their saddlehorns and pieces of hemp tied to their belts.

"'Morning, son." The slim man spoke up lazily, a grin creasing his thin mouth. He stared down at Jen a moment more, as if amused by the boy's own scrutiny of himself and his companion, then raised his eyes to look about him, taking in the well-grassed meadow, the creek, the comfortable cabin on the knoll. His eyes fixed a moment on the springhouse on the hillside above the cabin, and Jen's heart sank. They're looking for the Negro! he thought in dismay. Of course that's what they're doing!

"Best catch up that there pup of your'n before he gets his damned head kicked off, or I shoot him, one," the man remarked, still staring at the springhouse.

Jen caught Buff by the scruff of his neck, and holding the young dog tightly, backed away a little from the horses, still watching the men. "What does thee wish?" he asked, and gulped, ashamed of the quaver in his voice.

The heavy man shifted in his saddle and grinned. "Nothing special, sonny. I reckon we're just being neighborly. You could call it that, huh, Brad?"

Bradshaw's thin smile widened and his eyes slid away from the springhouse to rest on the cabin door. He stared so fixedly that the boy's own attention was caught. He must know the slave's there, he thought numbly, or . . . and he caught his breath suddenly. Pheb!

"Your name's Tanner, ain't it?" Bradshaw asked, still not taking his eyes from the cabin. His voice was thin and rasping, like a file on metal, and he drawled the words as if he hated to let them get past his almost lipless mouth. "Ain't it, son?"

Without replying, Jen tightened his grip on the dog and took

another backward step. His mouth was as dry as cotton, he couldn't have spoken if he willed it. The silence under the cottonwood seemed endless. He heard a restless cow bawl over in a stand of willows along the creek, and the katydids shrilling to an increasing climax in the heat. Abruptly they brought their song to a halt, even as the thin-faced Bradshaw laughed harshly.

"Hell, sonny, you think we're dumb? I seen you in the store one day a couple of months back with your sister. I know who you are. I know you and her live here and there ain't nobody else around. I heard lots about you Yankee Tanners, lots. I heard you was in cahoots with that nigger-loving preacher your sis teaches for, and I reckon maybe you might even know something about some runaway slaves been missing from Platte County off and on these last months. Huh?" he queried, turning his strange dark eyes down on the boy's apprehensive face, his grin broadening. "Don't be so scared, sonny, I'm just asking questions. Ain't no harm in that, is there? Your sis, now, she's right pretty, ain't she? Ain't she?" he demanded, suddenly insistent, his grin fading.

Jen backed away, by now so frightened that his legs were weak and hollow, his stomach sick.

Laughing, Bradshaw spurred his horse in the wake of the boy's uneasy retreat. The big gray he rode stepped eagerly into the bit, almost running Jen down. The man jerked his head up sharply, and the pressure of the bit on his tongue and the bars on his mouth brought the horse back on his haunches, skittering sideways, foam slathering from his hurt mouth, his ears flattening against his large, scarred head. At the same time the man jabbed spurs to his flanks, sending him once again into the cruel pull of the bit. Frantically, he began to dance and plunge.

Jen saw all this and to his fear was added hatred, hatred for this unnecessary cruelty, for the mockery in that thin face, and an alien wave of fury mounted through his whole being. He turned his back upon them and stooping, began to walk his dog toward the cabin. Let them run me down! he thought defiantly. I'll not jump for the likes of them! With as much dignity as possible he walked up the lane.

I'll shout, he thought. I'll warn Pheb.

What she could do, he did not know. They'd search the cabin, find the Negro girl. They might harm Pheb. The gun! Yes, the gun!

An image of it over the fireplace came to him clearly, and the day, many weeks ago, when he'd loaded it so carefully and set it back upon its pegs. That's it, he thought. I'll walk. I won't run. I can duck into the cabin. They'll have to dismount, I'll have time to get it, and it's already loaded. Yes . . . I can do it. He hastened his step a little, taking longer strides, his fear for his sister increasing as he drew nearer to the cabin. What else? he thought. What else can I do?

Behind him he heard their ragged laughter, the jingle of bit and spur, hooves beating the hard dirt of the lane, and he knew without looking around that the thin one, Bradshaw, was still alternately spurring and checking his horse, bringing him prancing and lunging at his heels. He could feel the horse's hot breath on the back of his neck, and from the corner of his eye saw the slender forelegs strike almost beside his own feet. The skin along his backbone crawled, and at any moment he anticipated a blow from those plunging hooves. Still he neither straightened, nor scuttled, but walked, keeping a tight grip on the dog, knowing obscurely that they would kill it if he let it loose again. An anguished pride had driven a wedge through his fear. They might burn the cabin and jump the claim but they would have to kill him first before they touched Pheb, and he knew that he would not hesitate to pull the trigger of the old musket if he could only get to it first.

The gray's shoulder struck him hard, staggering him, and he only managed to stay on his feet by twisting to one side and taking part of the fall on one hand, badly straining his wrist. The men guffawed, but he pushed himself up again and went on, his breath shaking in his throat, a film of hate blinding his eyes.

"Get away from him!"

He looked up, panting. Phebe stood in the open doorway of the cabin, the gun in her hands, the muzzle leveled above his head straight at Bradshaw's chest.

"Get away from him!" she repeated, her face very pale, her mouth strangely set.

The two men checked their horses abruptly.

"Jen, quickly, inside!" she cried in softer, more urgent tones.

Feeling the hot breath of the horse lifted from his neck, the boy moved to the cabin, then turned, drawing a deep, shaky breath, still keeping a grip upon his dog.

The two men sat their saddles, staring over his head at his sister. The heavy-set one was sober, but the other still grinned, and now he spat, raising dust in the lane.

"Now, get out! Phebe cried furiously. "Great, brave plowmen picking on a boy!"

Oh Lord, Lord, Jen thought suddenly, she doesn't know that old gun is loaded.

The heavy-set man flushed darkly, but Bradshaw's grin only broadened. "Why, howdy, ma'am. We didn't aim to hurt the boy none. We was just having a bit of fun whilst we looked about a bit. You see, ma'am, we're looking for a runaway slave, and we figured you-all out here might help us some, seeing somebody down the valley reckoned they heard wagon-wheels on this here road late last night. Traveling at night in this country's getting downright suspicious-seeming."

The heavy one recovered himself, guffawed suddenly, rocking in his saddle, slapping his thighs, the dust rising from his stained breeches. "You're a card, Brad. Damned if you ain't a card!"

His companion paid no attention, but dismounted suddenly, dropping his reins on the gray's neck to move in an easy, indolent walk up the path toward the girl.

"Jen, go by me! Get inside!" she cried, her face white and drawn. In hopeless determination she shifted her grip on the heavy musket, bringing it to bear again full upon the man's chest, while her finger crept under the trigger guard. If I can only bluff him! she thought frantically. I must!

She doesn't know it's loaded, Jen thought numbly, letting go his grip on the dog and straightening to reach uncertainly toward the gun, knowing that he must be the one to shoot. Yet even as he moved he was aware of the nearness of Bradshaw.

The heavy-set man's voice broke across the tension. "Listen, Brad, don't scare the young lady," he said urgently, awed by the pale determination in the girl's face and the steady muzzle of the gun. "Come on, we can come back with a posse to look for the damned nigger! Listen, Brad, quit that now!"

Bradshaw ignored him and took another step forward, his eyes fixed on the girl's face as though the gun did not even exist. His thin lips were grinning still. "Now, ma'am, no cause for alarm," he said, and laughed. "Said I'd be neighborly and drop by. I

reckon we could be right good friends if you was to set that fool piece down and act like you was glad to see me."

"Get back! Get away from me!" She shrank back until her shoulder touched the door frame.

He paused not six feet from her and laughed as though delighted at a joke. "Why, ma'am, you're a Quaker, ain't you? You don't want to up and kill me, do you? I only came a-looking for a runaway nigger, but I'm willing to quit looking if you'd be a little sociable and friendly."

The big man dismounted awkwardly and in haste. "Now, listen here, Brad, don't scare the young lady. Won't do none to scare her . . ."

"I been looking around for you a right smart time, Miss Tanner," Bradshaw said, his smile thinning. "I been wanting to get neighborly . . ."

She felt the worn trigger beneath her finger, but the touch of the cold metal did not reassure her now. What's the use, she thought hopelessly, I can't frighten him away. I can't outbluff him. . . .

"Harvey! Take care of the young fellow!" Bradshaw cried sharply without turning his head or taking his eyes from her face. At the same time he jumped, his hands reaching for the barrel of the gun. Phebe closed her eyes, sickened by the expression on his face, and only vaguely heard the crash, so violently did the old gun throw her back against the side of the door, all but breaking her shoulder. With a cry of pain she opened her eyes, staggering against the wall, trying to keep her feet. In confusion, not understanding yet, she watched Bradshaw's body spin away from her and collapse with a heavy thud. The echoes of the blast rang against the hillside, deafening her, and then, slowly, silence fell and the three stared down at the one, stupefied, watching almost curiously as a small stream of blood found its way slowly across the beaten earth of the path. The other man's jaw dropped while Phebe stared in disbelief, the gun muzzle sinking slowly in her hands until it pointed toward the ground at her feet. She was stunned, she could not think, as the echoes of that shot reverberated through her numb brain, even as the recoil of the stock against her shoulder numbed her bones.

It seemed many minutes before Bradshaw stirred and groaned, a low, hollow, animal sound that penetrated her shock and shook her to

the soul. She moved forward, started to kneel, but Jen seized her by the arm, taking the gun from her hands, and pulled her back into the cabin. Panting, he slammed the door closed, lowering the wooden bar into place, and then, running to the fireplace, he climbed on the bench and snatched down powder horn and ball box. He rushed to the window and, kneeling, began frantically to reload the old gun.

She leaned against the door, physically too ill to comprehend what he was doing, too sick and weak to move, yet, in horror, hearing the rending groans, louder now and more frequent, through the heavy wood. Sick with revulsion for what she had done, she could do no more than tremble against the cool planks as if skewered there. Each long moan was like a physical blow against her heart, her breath came in shallow gasps. In a dream she watched Jen's frenzied struggle with rod and gun and his sudden intentness, for outside, the wounded man had begun to drag himself up, raising himself on his elbows, legs almost rigid, head down, forehead and nose touching the dirt. Like an animal trying to drag itself away to die, he hitched a foot or two until his companion reached him and lifted him like a sack, half dragging, half carrying him to his horse where, straining and cursing, he got him across the saddle. The girl heard the sound of slow hoofbeats as the moaning died away, and saw Jen turn away from the window. Slowly, he set the gun-butt down, leaning it against the wall, and their eyes met.

"Missus! Missus, what happen?"

The soft, frightened plaint recalled them and broke the moment. Looking up, Phebe saw the Negro girl leaning from the loft, her dark head and shoulders showing. The sight of her was enough.

"Jen, we must get away from here at once! Thee must put Rob Roy to the wagon, for I am sure they will be back!"

The boy nodded, and as she moved away from the door, galvanized into action, he ran out of the cabin. Still trembling, but purposeful now, she moved to where the gun leaned against the wall and with revulsion emptied the ball and powder, knocking her hand against the stock, staring down at the dirty black mound as the powder poured out onto the table boards.

"Missus, what happen?" the soft voice pleaded.

Stirring, she raised her head to reply, "Come down quickly. We must leave here at once, but thee must not be frightened; it will be

all right. Bring your things, all your things, and hurry. Hurry!"

Through the open door she saw Jen come around the shed leading the Morgan and wagon into the lane. "Hurry!" she repeated, her voice gaining strength and urgency. Within minutes, the Negro girl was safely in the wagonbed. Jen threw feed sacks and straw hastily garnered from the shed over her; then he and Phebe took their places in all innocence upon the springless seat. A moment later they were turning from the lane onto the Lawrence road.

"Toward the fort, Jen! We can go up the back way and the woods will hide us. They may not think to look for us there. They'll surely think we went toward Lawrence and help. . . ." Ah, if only we get there, she thought, wanting Larry suddenly, wanting him with all her heart. He *had* been sincere, he had been telling the truth, he had come to warn them. If only, if only she had listened.

Beside her, Jen nodded and whipped up the horse. There wasn't much time.

THIRTY-THREE

It was not quite dark when the grim-faced Regulators caught up with them, and it was another good two miles to the fort and its shelter. The shadows stretched long and dark across the valley as the horses surrounded the wagon, obscuring it and themselves in a funneling cloud of dust. The hills along the Missouri were a deep purple, and the grass a lusher, deeper green. Cottonwoods in a grove beside the road turned their leaves over to the touch of the evening wind. As the coarse shouts and stamp of hooves subsided, Phebe heard a mourning dove call across the meadows and a pheasant make hoarse reply from a stand of dried brush in a nearby ravine. Stillness and dust gathered and fell about the wagon and the tight knot of horsemen who sat their saddles, staring at her angrily, their mouths hard.

"That's them, by God!"

Though still dazed, and numb with shock, she recognized the burly man who had been with Bradshaw. His eyes were dark with anger, his mouth curled in a vindictive sneer, as he pointed to her, repeating, "That's them. She's the one shot him!"

The men began to swing from their saddles and one, already dis-

mounted, grabbed Rob Roy's bridle, forcing his head down brutally with a heavy hand on the bit-ring.

"Search the wagon. Likely they got a damned nigger hid in there under them sacks and straw!"

Several men climbed with alacrity into the wagonbed. In a kind of savage glee they kicked out the sacks and straw and were rewarded, as their boots thudded against flesh, by a terrified squeal. One of them dragged the Negro girl over the tailgate, ripping her shoddy dress half off her back. Grinning, they tied her to the wagon's rear wheel.

"All right, down, you!" The man who seemed to be the leader reached up and roughly yanked Jen from the wagon, spinning him out upon the ground so that the boy stumbled and almost fell. A second man caught him by the shoulder and held him grimly.

Sudden fear brought Phebe from her seat. She jumped to the ground, starting toward Jen when two of the men caught her, whirling her back.

"Now, ma'am, just you stand quiet and you won't get hurt."

"I tell you, she's the one blew a hole in Brad," the burly man insisted, pointing at her again.

"What you want to do, Charlie, string up a girl?"

"Well, she shot him, didn't she?" he demanded, surly and belligerent still.

"Sure, but I ain't hanging no women if I can help it. Maybe watching her kid brother swing will be enough for her. . . ."

"No!"

"Shut up!" The hand holding her arm jerked savagely, sending pain up through her shoulder.

"Where's the rope, God damn it?"

"Please, please!" In terror she saw them shake out the coils of a rope, letting it snap heavily along the ground.

"Where?"

"That cottonwood over yonder. Made to order, by Jesus!"

"Oh, no, no . . ."

"Use your horse, Charlie. He'll stand a damn sight better. . . ."

"Just you don't get him affrightened so's I have to chase him half across the damn country!"

"Don't fret none; he don't have far to go!"

They laughed, and half dragged, half carried Jen toward the cottonwood. Charlie led his horse over after them.

"Please, I shot him! It's all my fault. . . . Please!"

They didn't seem to hear her. They paid no attention; even the men holding her were laughing, as if they didn't hear her cries. In the shadow of the cottonwood a man lifted Jen to the saddle, and she could see the rope dangling behind his head. White-faced, the boy ducked his head as the coarse fibers touched the bare skin of his neck and cheek. "Phebl!" he cried hoarsely and she heard. In a frenzy, she tried to free herself. "I shot him! I shot him! Hang me then! I shot him, does thee hear?"

The men hesitated then, and half turned toward her. A momentary stillness broken only by her own panting breath and the mournful cry of the dove again, like a death knell on the clear evening air, settled over the grove.

Then clearly and from close at hand came the jingle of gear, the creak of saddles, the tramp of hooves. Phebe drew a long, shuddering breath and fainted, sagging as though suddenly spineless between the two Regulators still holding tightly to her arms.

"Jesus!" one man swore softly. "Dragoons!"

"Quick, get the girl behind the wagon. No, hell, leave that nigger! They won't give a damn about her."

"What about the boy?"

The dragoons were on them, however; they came around a curve in the woods road, a detachment of twenty or more men riding in a column of twos, with two officers at the head. At a leisurely pace they approached the Regulators, who had frozen, waiting to brazen the thing out. In any case, there was little else they could do. They had managed only to carry the unconscious Phebe beyond the wagon. Jen still sat the horse, the noose around his neck, while the Negro girl whimpered and moaned at the wheel, her dark face a sickly gray. The dragoons moved up and halted, and stared bemused at the arrested tableau.

Major Arnold's bored gaze surveyed the scene, falling first and without recognition upon Jen, and the rope dangling over the cottonwood limb, the end in the hands of the burly Regulator who had accompanied Bradshaw to the Tanners' cabin earlier that afternoon. Then he turned to look at the other men with cold, indifferent eyes. They stared back, open relief in their faces, for they

knew him well; more than one of them there had stood him to a drink at the Star of the West saloon on Shawnee Street. They knew his reputation and where his sympathies lay, and they were confident they need fear no interference on his part.

Impassively, Arnold acknowledged their several gestures of greeting and glanced at the Negro girl sobbing against the wagon wheel. His mouth thinned abruptly. He raised his right hand, bringing it forward in a brusque sweep. "Detail, forrard!" he ordered, turning his face away and spurring his horse on.

Behind him, St. Clair came abruptly from his first shock engendered by the sight of Jen Tanner with a hangman's noose around his neck and the weeping Negro girl. His worst fears were realized: Jen had been caught helping a runaway. My God, then where was Phebe? But his attention was distracted by the knowledge of what Arnold intended to do, or rather, not to do.

At St. Clair's back the troopers had already put their horses into motion and his own mare, feeling the movement behind her, had taken a forward step. He jerked her up shortly, dismounting in the same motion, and bringing with his action the shuffle and push of the horses to a halt. "Major, we can't ride on and let them lynch that boy!" he cried, anger and disbelief edging his voice.

Major Arnold reined in his horse sharply, but neither turned nor looked back. "Unless you want me to have you arrested here and now, Lieutenant, for insubordination, mount your horse!" The clear, cold voice carried to every man there, and by contrast, St. Clair's bitter cry seemed shrill, almost hysterical. Even in his anger, St. Clair felt a vagrant admiration for this icy control. There was little time for comparisons, however, for Arnold had set spur to the flanks of his big chestnut gelding, repeating, "Detail, forward!" clearly dismissing the whole scene and his subordinate's agitation.

There was no time to think; there was no time to weigh consequences. His face hot with anger, St. Clair shouted hoarsely, "Detail, halt! Dismount and stand at easel!"

Behind him, men and horses milled in confusion. Several dragoons dismounted to stand by their horses' heads, staring in dismay at the boy with the noose around his neck and the men who stood ready to drive the horse out from under him and leave him swinging from the cottonwood. The rest, troubled, checked their

horses momentarily, turning their attention upon the two officers unexpectedly wrangling before them.

Arnold brought his horse around and walked the gelding back until he stood a few feet from St. Clair. "Do you know what you're doing, Lieutenant?" he demanded harshly.

"Sir, this is a lynching, and we have every authority to stop it. We have every authority to stop an act of violence by a mob!" As he said this, his eyes on the stony face above him, St. Clair was briefly aware that just a year ago he'd commanded a detail to ride past just such a mob, past a rope-bound Negro, past an act of mob violence, within the shadow of the wooded hill at his back. He could know, ruefully, that since then he had made his stand.

"Before these witnesses, you dare to countermand my orders, sir?" Arnold asked. In his voice now was a slight note of incredulity.

"Sir, if you don't give the order to stop this—this murder, I will!" He turned toward the irresolute dragoons and ordered sharply, wanting to give them no time to think, no time to weigh consequences, "The rest of you men dismount. Sergeant Devlin, line up those civilians over there by the wagon and disarm them at once. Anson, free that boy. Quickly!"

Arnold's face grew dark and a wild fury replaced his frozen calm. His mouth twisted into an ugly line as he shouted, and it was more a thin, high scream than a shout, "I'll court-martial the first man of you who makes a move! By Christ, I'll have you in irons by morning. Sergeant, arrest Lieutenant St. Clair. Arrest him, I say!"

The sergeant stepped forward uncertainly to stand indecisively beside St. Clair, his eyes mutely pleading for someone, anyone, to help him out of his dilemma. The rest of the detail stared, slack-mouthed and confused, from one officer to the other. Several of the Regulators, impressed by St. Clair's curt commands, had already dropped their pistols from their belts and moved toward the wagon. They, too, stopped to stare as the two army officers faced each other.

"I'm warning you, Major, if you don't stop this, I will. You've got orders in your pocket to prevent just this kind of thing." St. Clair spoke clearly, though he hardly knew what he was saying or doing, and unwittingly let the palm of his hand drop to the butt of his pistol.

Arnold's eyes widened. "Are you threatening me, sir?" he

screamed, all cool plan and purpose vanished, leaving him with nothing but his original intent to bring this young man down.

"No, sir. I am not."

"By God, I'll see you shot for this!" Arnold's face was suffused and dark, his hot eyes seemingly fixed in a wide, meaningless glare on the younger man's face. But his own hand dropped, reaching for his pistol, and he had whipped the weapon clear of its holster before St. Clair realized his danger. Arnold's razor-sharp spurs dug against the gelding's flanks as he turned swiftly in the saddle, and his horse leapt convulsively sideways as the shot exploded, sending the bullet aimed at St. Clair wide of its mark. In a reflex action, St. Clair's fingers closed over his Colt. He jerked it out, raised and fired it, while he stood as though apart, watching as Arnold leaned sharply from his saddle, hung there a moment, the horse still jerking sideways beneath him, then fell with a heavy thud to the ground. He saw now the dark eyes widen, grow empty, the thin sullen face stretch, pull apart, and fade, as smoke stung his own eyes and the realization of what he had done broke over him.

"My God, I didn't . . . I didn't want . . ." he began, his face white with shock; then he stopped and stared silently down at the inert, sprawled body, one hand still twitching slightly in the dust. There was nothing for him to say and he stood, watching, as Sergeant Devlin knelt by the body. Blood, almost black in the fading light, worked its way in tiny, fingerlike streams through the dust.

Half a mile away, Philip Maxwell heard the shots and straightened suddenly in his saddle, holding his horse as he listened, alert and cautious, while the fingers of one hand carefully creased and folded his discharge, signed and stamped that day, in the pocket of his new civilian shirt. Leaving the army hadn't been quite as easy as he'd thought, and he'd received this paper with some regret. However, this was no time to dwell upon what he'd done, those shots were too close. Goddam bushwackers? he wondered. Got to remember I ain't in uniform. Got to be careful I don't get shot in the back by some damn Law and Order man. Sure hate to get knocked off my horse this close to proposing!

He listened a minute more, and when the shots were not repeated put his horse into a trot, keeping a wary eye on the road ahead and the trees and bushes beside it. Not for nothing had he fought Indians all these years, and he saw the group of men

gathered in the grove long before they saw him. The last rays of the sun glinted on familiar blue dragoon-facings. He kept moving, to arrive upon the disordered scene within a few minutes of its climax.

Sergeant Devlin had risen from his brief examination of the major's body and had recovered himself enough to set a few of his men to disarming the civilians. But no one had yet made a move to remove the noose from Jen's neck, and the boy sat frozen, with his arms, the wrists crossed and tied, held stiffly before him in unnatural supplication.

St. Clair stood rooted, sick with horror, his pistol still in his hand, as he stared down at Arnold's inert form. Unaided and forgotten, Phebe had risen dizzily to her feet and was leaning against the wagon wheel, much as Maxwell had found her a year ago. Yet this time he did not see her at once. He had eyes only for St. Clair and the body at his feet, and he could hardly credit what he saw. He came up to the group at a canter, dismounted, and walked over to stand across the sprawled figure in the dust, his blue eyes taking in the white, shocked face of his former lieutenant.

"Dead?"

St. Clair did not even seem to hear him, or to see him, and it was Sergeant Devlin who answered, "Dead as a mackerel! I reckon he was dead before he hit the ground. The lieutenant's ball caught him square in the chest. Knocked him out of the saddle pretty as you please!" Devlin's voice held its own measure of shock, but underlying it was a vague, satisfied note which Maxwell understood well. This was officers' business!

"Ah," Maxwell stepped back, his gaze still fixed on St. Clair. "How come, Devlin?"

"Well, they were having some differences over them fellows yonder," he pointed to the sullen huddle of civilians circled by the dragoons. "The major wasn't going to stop them bastards from stringing up that kid. Reckon he figured they'd caught him slave-stealing fair and square, but the lieutenant wasn't having none of that. He took it on himself to try and stop 'em, and he countermanded the major's orders, and . . . well, hell, Phil, you know the major. . . . It ended up like this. I reckon if we'd stepped more lively and put the lieutenant under arrest like he wanted, this

wouldn't have happened. But it was kind of hard to figure out what to do, what with that kid over there . . ."

Maxwell followed the wave of his hand and saw Jen then, and his face paled. He swung around, bellowing to the nearest dragoons, "For God's sake, get that boy down!" He saw Phebe by the wagon, moving unsteadily to the side of the whimpering Negro girl. "Phebe!" he cried hoarsely, starting toward her.

Her head came up, the stunned look upon her face merging to recognition, and an immense and mingled gladness and relief. With a cry and without noticing anyone else she ran straight into his arms.

Stirred from his preoccupation with the dead man at his feet, St. Clair looked up at Maxwell's shout. Phebe! Had they harmed her? Concerned by the pallor of her face he took a step forward, then hesitated as he saw the look on her face and Maxwell's unhesitating arms closing around her. He looked away, a cold shudder of loneliness and despair holding him rigid and unthinking, and it was a long moment before he heard Sergeant Devlin speaking at his side. The man stood to his left, staring down at Arnold, shifting his feet uneasily. His voice was low and hurried, as though he wished to say what had to be said and be done with it.

"Sir, I reckon . . . well, sir, we figure it might help some to tell you that if it comes to a court-martial . . . well, there ain't a man here won't be willing' to testify to the truth. There ain't a man here thought the major was in the right, and I reckon every last one of 'em will say so and swear to it!"

St. Clair turned slowly, startled from his numbness, and saw the earnest good-feeling in the man's sunburnt face. He looked past him at the men gathered with their horses and their prisoners beyond, and for the first time since he'd received his commission, for the first time since he'd commanded men, he felt the silent run of their sympathy for him. For him!

"I'm grateful to you, Sergeant Devlin. To you all," he replied simply.

"Hell, Lieutenant, you'd do best to pull up stakes and head West!" Maxwell exclaimed as the girl's sobbing lessened and he could turn his attention once more to the matter at hand. "Devlin, you could patch up a fair enough story for the general, I reckon, and you men could grubstake the lieutenant. You could have my

horse, sir, so they couldn't go adding horse-stealing and making off with government property to your charge."

"Thanks," St. Clair replied absently, noting that Phebe had raised her head and was staring at him but that she did not seem to see him. There was no recognition in her look, and he thought it was because she could not bear the horror of what he had just done. Actually, hearing his voice, she had looked up, still numb with shock. She had not seen him, she had not seen Arnold yet; in fact, she did not fully realize what had happened and was happening. But as St. Clair shifted his attention back to Maxwell and what he was saying, he missed seeing her sudden, startled look as she realized that he was there, the tentative smile that vanished when she caught sight of Arnold's body. Only then did she realize that there was more here than the terrible threat to Jen, and she stared, slowly comprehending, at the sprawled figure, the arms flung out. Her gaze returned to St. Clair just as he fumblingly holstered his heavy pistol, and she understood.

"I could give you a note to Bright," Maxwell insisted. "I reckon if you got up into his country you'd be fine enough. If you bear north, to the north of the Platte and into the western edges of the Bad Lands, you'd likely find him with Chief Two-Horse's Blackfeet. They're pretty good Indians as Indians go, and you could do a hell of a lot worse than take up with 'em. Bright'd see you got through the winter and the tribe is friendly, so the army don't bother 'em none. Likely they'd never think to look for you up there. Come spring, you could drift on across into Canada and that'd be the end of that."

Why, Phebe thought in anguish, Larry! She watched him kneel beside the body, one hand hesitantly reaching out to touch the oddly twisted shoulder. She could understand with all her soul the dread and regret and self-damnation he must feel, for the rending moans of the man she had shot only hours before were still in her heart. Ah, my God, what have we done, thee and I? A desire to go to him, to comfort him, drew her from the shelter of Maxwell's arms to stand apart a little, even as St. Clair rose and moved away from Arnold, turning back to his men.

"Thanks, Maxwell," St. Clair said slowly, not looking at him. There was little spirit in his voice; it sounded dazed and apologetic. "Sergeant Devlin, I think some of the men had better put

him over his horse. There's no doubt that he's . . ." He broke off and turned reluctantly, as if drawn against his will, to look down once more at the body. With an effort he roused himself again. "I'd like to see your friend Bright again, Maxwell. I've always wondered what kind of life his was; I've even envied him somewhat. But I think perhaps it would be best if I returned to the fort with—with the major . . ." He paused again, his glance going past Devlin's impassive face to the silent dragoons beyond him.

Devlin waited a moment more, then quickly detailed two men to lift Arnold's body to the saddle. A third moved to quiet the big gelding as he tried to whirl, snorting and trembling when the limp burden fell across his back and was lashed securely. His quivering nostrils widened at the smell of blood, and St. Clair was reminded of the sorrel with its bloody burden circling the head of the wagon train, the merciless sun revealing every detail with a harshness he knew he would never forget.

He recalled that his men had avoided looking at him that day, averting their eyes from where he had stood, sickened, one hand on the horse's dragging rein, staring in horror at the cost of his decision. He remembered the feel of the arid wind blowing from the dust-dry river, cooling the sweat on his forehead even as it brought unbearable heat to his body. He remembered the sweet, sticky smell of new blood, and the sound of the flies, already gathering.

He had been completely alone then; now, strangely, he'd come full circle. Yet this time he was not alone. Sergeant Devlin was repeating, his eyes fixed anxiously on the lieutenant's face, "There ain't a man, sir, won't be willing and glad to testify that the major drew down on you first, nor about what was going on here." Behind him there was a hoarse murmur of assent among the troopers, and several moved their heads emphatically. Arnold had awed them and had held them by fear, but not a man of them had liked him, and more than one had hated him.

"Thank you, Devlin . . . all of you. I appreciate that. And many thanks, anyway, Maxwell. I—I hope you have all the best. . . ." He paused, his eyes straying to Phebe's face briefly before he turned to catch his stirrup, ready to mount.

"Larry, wait!"

His hand held the stirrup a second, then dropped it as he swung around.

"Please, Larry, thee does not understand!" She ran up to him, gently touching his arm. "Thee is right, for thee must go back, but thee must know . . . thee must know that I . . . that I . . . Oh, Larry!" Words failed her abruptly, she could only look up into his puzzled face.

On his part, his bewilderment was brief. "Why, Pheb, I . . ." he began. When comprehension reached him, he began to smile, and his face lit up, the apathetic mask dropping away to make him young again. "Pheb! Pheb!" he cried, stepping away from his horse.

Phebe found her voice, though it was little more than a murmur now. "I want thee to know, Larry, that I want to stand by thee, if only . . . if only thee will stand by me. For I have done . . . as thee has done . . ." Somberly, she glanced again at Arnold's body, moved by the ironic chance which had driven them both to this same deed.

Maxwell had taken one step forward, then come to a halt. He knew; the tone of her cry, the look on her face, were against him. It was St. Clair, after all. He turned away. Bewildered, he looked away from the girl he had almost claimed as his own. His hand fumbled again to his shirt pocket, touching the carefully folded discharge papers there. Hell, he thought, catching Sergeant Devlin's curious and sympathetic eye, who the hell would want me but the goddam army?

(continued from front flap)

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